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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

April 15, 1896.

No. 912.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXXI.

Gentleel Joe's Lone Hand;

OR, SHADOWING



GENTEEL JOE STARED WITH A MYSTIFIED FACE.

THE BIG THREE.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HIRAM HAWK, THE HARLEM
DETECTIVE," "MAJOR BULLION," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ENDING OF A CONTRACT.

"Your year's about up, isn't it, Joe?"

"It ends to-morrow."

"I thought so, and a nice snap you've had of it."

"Yes, it's been an easy job; but if the old gentleman's fears had been confirmed and the worst had come, I might have had my hands

full. We won't rejoice till we're out of the woods, for there's no telling what may take place between this hour and noon to-morrow."

"When does your contract with him expire?"

"It expires exactly at twelve," and the detective, known best as Genteel Joe, leaned forward and took a cigar from the open box on the table.

His companion was one of his friends, a man about his own age and keen-witted, but not connected in any way with the profession.

Still, for all this, Quincy Quick often dropped in with suggestions which Joe Nichols accepted, and which he found useful in many ways.

"It's been a strange watch for you, Joe," observed the other after a pause. "Here you've watched an old man for a year for five thousand dollars. Of course, if he had vanished it would have been your duty to find him, or if, worse still, he had been murdered, you would have had to take the trail and run the assassins down, no matter whither that trail led."

"You've stated the case in a sentence, Quincy. And I'm free to say that I'm glad the end of the year finds Duke Daniels in good health and in the city."

For a little while the two smoked in silence, and the clock struck ten; then Quincy Quick picked up his hat with a start and pushed back his chair.

At that same moment footsteps in the hall outside approached the door, and the detective watched the knob as if expecting a messenger of importance.

"Come in!" was called out, in response to the rap, and the door opened to admit a young man who looked from the detective to the visitor.

"Which is Mr. Nichols?" he asked.

"I'm the man," and Genteel Joe held out his hand for the bit of folded paper which the visitor carried.

The detective quickly mastered the message, and, throwing it upon the table, asked the messenger:

"There's no clew?"

"None at all. It's simply dreadful, and Miss Lotty is almost in hysterics."

"Tell her I'm coming."

The youth vanished, and the eyes of Quincy Quick, now filled with excitement, were riveted upon the detective's face.

"It comes at the last moment. You're going to earn your five thousand," was his remark.

"It looks that way."

"You're going to the house, I see? There's nothing to tell whether it's vanishment or murder. The messenger only said it was 'dreadful,' but his sentence is susceptible of two meanings."

Genteel Joe did not speak, but put on his light overcoat, and the friends went down the stairs together.

"You'll let me know in the morning what's up, won't you?" asked Quick, on parting.

"Yes, before that, perhaps," was the answer, and they separated.

Nichols took a car and settled back in one corner while it bore him up town.

His had been a strange agreement with the man whose house he was about to enter—that of Duke Daniels. The detective had simply agreed to watch over him as much as possible for one year for five thousand dollars, for Daniels feared that he was a marked man; he believed that he had enemies who would not hesitate to take his life, but the identity of these people he had refused to divulge even to his paid guardian.

Genteel Joe had carried out his part of the contract with circumspection.

More than once, when Daniels knew it not, he had a friendly shadow, and the detective had kept ward over him in town and out.

Joe had not had occasion to shadow any one far, and on one occasion only did he suspect that the man who had engaged him had an enemy.

He had nearly forgotten the discovery, but the message from the old man's

daughter had brought it back fresh to his mind.

It did not take the detective long to reach the house on the avenue.

As he approached he noticed how still everything was about the residence, as if its inmates were all asleep.

Genteel Joe mounted the steps and rang.

Almost immediately the door was opened by a middle-aged person, with a professional face, who smiled as he remarked:

"You are Mr. Nichols? I'm glad you've come. Your coming will help to quiet my patient; she's a little nervous yet, and no wonder."

The speaker was the family physician—Doctor Baker. He at once led the way to the parlor, where he shut the door carefully and turned upon the detective, with his thin face and piercing black eyes.

"I was the first one sent for by Miss Lotty. She seemed to think of me first, because I have been his physician for twenty years, and it was at my suggestion that she sent for you without notifying the police. We can do that later on, you know."

Genteel Joe bowed.

"It is quite mysterious. I came in response to her summons, and found things pretty much as the murderer left them."

"The murderer, doctor?"

"It's nothing less than murder, Mr. Nichols. It's a cold-blooded affair, and one that will startle New York, owing both to the nature of the crime and the victim's prominence."

As the doctor finished he led the way, in a stately manner, toward the hallway, but the moment he opened the door there was a cry, and the figure of a woman rushed forward.

"So you've come!" cried the young girl, who bounded from the lower steps of the broad stairs and paused before the detective. "You're the gentleman who made the contract with him; but the deed has been done, and just at the end of the year!"

Doctor Baker laid his hand restrainingly on Lotty's arm, but she drew back indignantly:

"I'm all right, doctor," she exclaimed. "I am going to the room with you. My nerves are a little unstrung, but Mr. Nichols will want to hear all, I know, and—"

She did not finish, but turned hurriedly and opened a door across the hall.

"It happened in there. You can see him from here, Mr. Nichols. I found him myself in the chair, just as he sits now, and I wouldn't let Doctor Baker disturb him."

Genteel Joe had pushed his way into the library, furnished in luxurious style, and was looking at a man who reclined in a large velvet padded arm-chair, under the drop-light near the mahogany desk.

This was Duke Daniels, the retired banker, the man of wealth and learning, the gentleman whom he had shadowed for almost a year in order to keep from him the enemies he imagined were plotting against him.

Joe Nichols felt a singular thrill while he stood there, in the library, and realized that the deed had been done at the very last moments of the year of contract.

On the morrow at noon his watch would expire, and he had expected to present himself at the door of that very house and get his wages.

But now—

Things had taken another turn!

Duke Daniels was dead—had been murdered, Baker said, and he (Genteel Joe) would have to throw aside all else and take the trail.

Doctor Baker broke in upon the detective's thoughts by stepping forward and leaning over the dead man in the chair.

"It's very plain," said he with an upward glance. "Any one can see that the man was killed by a hand that understood its terrible trade. Nothing in the

world could convince me that this is the work of a novice. A trained hand and a trained eye working together, sir—"

"If you will let Mr. Nichols take a look at him, doctor, you will be doing Justice a favor," put in Lotty Daniels, and the man of medicine flushed and stepped back.

Genteel Joe scrutinized the white face before him.

There were no marks of violence there, and the expression was calm and painless.

"It's in the neck," whispered the doctor, with a glance at the girl. "It's the stab of a dagger. It looks to me like the stab of a needle-like stiletto—you've seen them, no doubt—but all the same it was a death stroke."

Doctor Baker pulled down the dead man's collar and laid one finger softly upon a certain spot on the white skin.

Joe Nichols looked a little closer, and made out a small mark there; just a little red spot, it seemed, not a cut.

The hand of the victim's daughter fell upon Joe's arm.

"I didn't send for the police," she spoke. "He told me to send direct for you in case anything happened. You see what has happened. Isn't the year up to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, miss."

"He was talking about it to-day. He said he hoped he would be five thousand dollars poorer at noon to-morrow. He looked forward with a good deal of anxiety to the last hour. I'm sure he feared to-night, for when I went up to my room to read awhile he gave me a look full of doubt and fear."

"What did you hear, Miss Lotty?"

"Nothing but the closing of the door."

"When was that?"

"An hour ago, perhaps. I went at once to the window, from which I can see the sidewalk in front of the house. The lamp on the corner always covers the sidewalk in front of the door with its light, and it did so when I looked. I saw a man standing on the walk, and while I looked he moved away."

"You did not hear the door open when the assassin entered the house."

"I heard nothing. I only heard the closing of the door when the man went out."

"It's very strange," said Doctor Baker. "Here's a young lady whose faculties are fully developed, but who hears the shutting, not the opening, of a door, and that when the portal must have been softly closed."

With a start and a little pallor about her lips, Lotty whirled upon the doctor.

"I am telling things just as I heard them," she said, with some asperity. "I heard the door shut. I did not hear it open. The murderer might have been concealed in the house."

"Could he have hid himself thus?"

"Possibly. This is a house of many rooms, some of which we don't look into once in six months. Now, yonder is a room, the door behind yon swinging bookcase, which I have never entered."

The detective followed with his glance the pointing finger. The girl then stepped forward, touched a button set in the wall, and the case of books swung slowly back.

"That was his secret room," she stated. "He used to spend hours in there. You can go in and see if the assassin, who may have been in the secret, made it his hiding place."

Joe Nichols immediately stepped into the apartment, and—stood in the middle of the floor like a man in a maze!

CHAPTER II.

THE ASSASSIN'S BLADE.

The door had swung or been pushed shut behind the detective, and he stood alone in the little room.

He faced a square table in front of which stood a revolving chair with a cane bottom.

But it was not the furniture of the place which drew from Joe Nichols, the Home-run Detective, the cry which

welled to his lips. It was something quite different.

On the table lay a piece of paper which was held down by a knife, the point of which was buried in the wood.

The detective, horrified, approached and saw that the top of the sheet was embellished with the outlines of a coffin, on which was traced the name of the dead man in the library—Duke Daniels.

There was a smattering of sentences across the paper, but the knife had torn through these on its way to the wood, and he saw that they were nearly obliterated.

Genteel Joe stared at all this with a mystified face, but with eyes that took in everything in sight.

He seemed to see at once that the person who had committed the murder had entered the little chamber, if, indeed, he had not made it his ambush.

He leaned over the table and was looking at the dagger, which he finally pulled out, when the door behind him opened, and he turned to confront Doctor Baker.

"You've found something?" said the doctor. "I see that you've already found a clew."

"I can't say. There's a dagger in the table and a paper pierced by the blade."

"I see—he left this as a reminder of his vengeance, or to give you added mystery."

Doctor Baker stepped forward, and his gaze rested on the knife and paper for a moment.

Joe Nichols folded his arms and calmly looked on.

"Why, it's a coffin!" cried the doctor. "It's a coffin with his name on it, and the knife has been driven through the sheet into the table."

"Exactly."

"Did you ever see anything like this?"

"But once, and that was years ago."

"I don't recall it."

"Perhaps not; it was the murder of a young man by the hands of a lot of revengeful fellows, who wanted to mystify the police, and tried it with a knife-pierced paper left in the room of the crime."

"But this assassin varies the game, you see. He leaves the knife in another room."

Joe had picked up the paper and was looking at it carefully.

"Can you make out the sentences?" asked the doctor.

"It is a meaningless scrawl. You can see for yourself."

He handed the document to his companion, who looked at it.

"I see. The name on the coffin's quite plain, but the rest seems to be in a language with which I am not acquainted."

"If it is a language at all, doctor," was the reply. "Where did you leave Miss Lotty?"

"She took my advice and went up to her room."

Doctor Baker had picked up the dagger and was looking at its handle of black, twisted ivory, handling it with caution and drawing his fingers softly along its edge.

Genteel Joe called him from this task by his voice.

"I'll take that, if you please, doctor," and the man of medicine, starting a little, handed it over with a smile.

The detective folded the pierced paper, and put both it and the blade away.

"It's not the same blade that did the deed," said the doctor.

"Why not?"

"The work was done with a narrower dagger, nothing at all like the one that was buried in the table."

This was good logic, and the detective nodded approvingly.

Five minutes later Joe Nichols stood alone in the parlor, to the right of the hall, and in another minute he was joined by a man who came in, and, after looking all around, shut the door.

This was Savage, the coachman, the man who probably knew more about Duke Daniels's affairs than any living person.

"Come over here," said Joe. "You're Savage?"

"Yes, Sam Savage; you're the detective in the case, aren't you?"

"I am Joe Nichols."

"Yes, yes, the man Lotty sent for. You're all right, I know, and you've got a dark case."

"You think so, Savage?"

"I know it. It would knock me out o' time in three seconds, but it's your business—it's your trade."

"That's right, Savage. What do you know?"

"Ask me what I don't know and you'll get more information."

"You've been with him some time, haven't you?"

"Five years, come next March."

"And you know something about him?"

"What a coachman could pick up."

"Your master must have had a dangerous foe, Savage."

Instantly there came to the servant's face a pallor which rivaled the snow in whiteness.

"He had—a great enemy," he said, dropping his voice almost to a whisper.

"Did he know that you shared his secret of the existence of this bitter foe?"

"He knew it."

"Did you ever see this enemy, Savage?"

"No; but I felt him once."

"You felt him? How?"

"It was like the touch of a ghost, for that matter, only I know ghosts don't flit about, pressing people against the wall and driving their blood cold through their veins."

"Tell me. Now, take it coolly, Savage. I have some time, and you needn't go fast."

"It's a short story—about my encounter with Duke Daniels's foe. It was right in this house, and the time was a month ago. I was in the hall out there, and somehow or other the gas had been turned out. I don't know how it came about, for no one ever turns it out, but it burns all night, not very high, but still it burns. Well, I heard some one in the library, and I knew that my master was there, and that Miss Lotty had not come back from the opera."

"I wanted to drive her to the opera that night, but she insisted on my remaining at home, for she said her father would be alone, and he did not feel very well. Every now and then I would go into the hall, after instructions from Miss Lotty, to see if he was still in the library. It was on one of these trips that I found the hall dark, with the gas turned out."

"It was queer, devilish queer. I remember stopping in the hall and wondering what could have turned out the gas just then. I concluded I would relight it, and went forward with my hand, feeling for my match-box, when the door of the library opened. The room beyond was almost dark, too."

"I thought I saw Duke Daniels in the chair at the desk, but the next moment the door shut and I was brushed by the person who came out. It was a personal contact, so perceptible that I was thrown back a step. I was brushed by the man who emerged from the library, with a single word on his lips. It was 'Vengeance!' In another moment the key turned in the lock of the front door, it opened and shut, and I was alone in the hall once more."

"My first thought was of Duke Daniels, and I sprang to the library door and jerked it open. He was there, sitting in his chair at the desk, with his face as white as the face of a corpse and a pen in his hand. But I noticed that he had not traced a single word on the sheet before him, and that he was trying to control his nerves. I touched his shoulder, and he looked up into my face with a wan smile. I never saw his face so terribly agitated before. It was some time before he could breathe. 'Did you see him?' he asked, searching my face with an eagle's glance."

"I did not know what to say, and before I could answer him his hand was at my wrist, and it had a clutch like iron manacles. 'Never mind,' he said, 'it's all right, Savage. You didn't see the only enemy Duke Daniels has. Well, I wish you had, though, and—killed him!'"

"That was all. The man, whoever he was, left the house. I have not encountered him since. I did not hear his voice beyond the utterance of the one word, 'Vengeance'; but some day I may hear it again. Then I can identify the man, for that peculiar voice may hang him one of these days."

Sam Savage looked at the detective, and once more across the room.

"How came you to find the secret door which leads to this place?" asked Joe Nichols.

"Lotty pointed it out to me, and said you were here."

"The girl has retired, has she?"

"She is up-stairs, but she hasn't retired. She won't do that till she sees you again."

"And the doctor?"

"Oh, he's gone. What do you think of him?"

"I have seen but little of the man. He's the family physician, isn't he?"

"Yes, the—family doctor," smiled Savage. "He's not on very good terms with Miss Lotty. The girl hasn't the best of opinions of Jared Baker, for one thing, because he has some strange sorts of pets, a cageful of which he once fetched to the house."

"To show them to Daniels?"

"I suppose so. They were snakes of all kinds and colors. You never saw the like. Why, sir, they kept up such an infernal hissing and writhing that when Mr. Daniels called Lotty into the room to look at the doctor's pets she nearly fainted, and ordered the man and his reptiles away."

"Is that the real cause of her dislike for Doctor Baker?"

"It may be more than that; but I know that she hasn't liked the doctor ever since the episode of the snakes. It was thought at the time that one or two of the smaller reptiles got loose and made off, but the doctor assured Mr. Daniels that it could not be so."

When Savage finished the detective opened the door leading back into the library, and they stepped into the death chamber.

"The enemy must have come back," said the coachman, looking at the silent figure in the arm-chair. "If I had been in the house to-night I might have caught him in time, and—I would have killed the brute! I am man enough for that."

Joe Nichols did not reply, but stepped across the room and stopped beside the dead man.

Savage looked on a moment, and then darted away, to stoop in one corner and strike at something on the floor.

"It's one of them infernal snakes!" he cried. "One of those which escaped from Doctor Baker's box."

CHAPTER III.

GENTEEL JOE'S "FRIEND," SPLINTERS.

Genteel Joe sprang toward the man, who had dropped upon his knees in one corner of the library, and was trying to get at an object which persisted in keeping out of sight.

"I saw the little devil's eyes!" said Savage. "They had a greenish light, but I knew at once what it was, for once we had a whole cage of Indian serpents to get loose on shipboard, and had the devil's own time getting rid of the lot."

"On shipboard? You've been to sea, then?"

"Where haven't I been?" laughed the coachman. "I'm a regular Jack-o'-all-trades."

The detective looked for the serpent, but without success.

The two men together went through the hunt, and turned up the carpet in their search, but found nothing.

"It may be poisonous, and it may not," said Savage. "It looks like a little green

snake we found in the ship that time, which fastened its fangs in the second mate, so that the next day we tied a cannon ball to his body and let the sharks have him. Just think of Miss Lotty living in a house infested with such a deadly thing! The doctor ought to be choked for his folly. He knew the snake got away."

"He knew it, Savage? That's a bold charge."

"Maybe I'd better modify it. I'll do it for the doctor's sake, but the way he acted that night—his boldness and his manners—told me that he wouldn't have cared much if he had emptied the entire whole cargo of creepers in the room. It's out of the way now, probably behind one of the bookcases, but I don't intend to give his serpentship any rest till I've rooted him out. I owe it to Miss Lotty, for there's death in the house while the snake makes it his home."

"You must be careful, Savage. Don't let the reptile make a victim of you. I may have need of you in the future."

"As a witness against the murderer whom I didn't get to see, but whom I felt and heard?"

"Perhaps."

"All right. I'll be on time when wanted. You can bank on me—Sam Savage. There's Lotty, now—in the hall, and she wants to see you before you go back."

The coachman slipped away and the detective went into the hall where he met Lotty Daniels.

She had not retired, and now she stood against the bannister, with a shawl thrown over her shoulders.

Joe Nichols saw that her face was pale and almost bloodless, and that her hand shook a little where it rested on the newel.

"Is Doctor Baker gone?" asked the young girl.

"He has gone away."

"Good! I don't fancy the man—I never liked him, and since the night he brought the serpents here to show father, I have detested him. What did you find in the little room beyond the bookcase, Mr. Nichols?"

The Home-run ferret replied with the story of his find—the pierced paper with its startling embellishment and the buried dagger, and Lotty listened without a word.

"Good night. Remember! You are in duty bound to find the hand that struck him down," said the girl. "That was your solemn bargain with father. Tomorrow your espionage would have ended. Tomorrow the hunt begins."

She paused a little while at the door and seemed to collect her thoughts.

"I wonder if the assassin knew anything of the contract," she went on. "It looks so, for didn't he wait till the last moment, and then struck the blow as if to show you, Mr. Nichols, that he defies your cunning. This must go to the police. You can report the crime, but you are to be the detective on the trail."

Genteel Joe left the house with these words of the girl's ringing in his ears.

He went back to the room where he had been found by the messenger and sat down.

It was past midnight now.

The lights on the streets below flickered in the brisk wind that came up over the rippling waters of the bay and fanned the cheeks of belated pedestrians.

Joe Nichols, the human ferret, was alone in his cosy little quarters.

He took from his pockets the pierced paper and the dagger.

He bent over the former and looked at it with more scrutiny than he had yet bestowed upon it.

The scrawl took shape at last.

What had appeared a lot of jumbled sentences, twisted enough to worry the best expert, now came out in startling characters, and his keen vision swept a good deal of mystery from them.

The minutes flitted by, and the nearest clock on the street told the vanishment of another hour.

Joe Nichols was still bent over the paper.

Word by word he had wrested the writing from the realms of the mysterious, and now he leaned back and breathed free again.

"It was the work of a hand of vengeance. I see the motive, but can it be true? Can it be—"

He did not finish the sentence, for there stopped at his door that moment footsteps whose sound riveted his gaze in that direction.

Joe Nichols stepped across the room and stopped at the door.

"Are you in, Joseph?" piped a shrill voice beyond the portal.

Genteel Joe answered by opening the door.

"It's me," said the same voice as the figure of a strange creature dodged into the room. "Shut the door, Josey—there! It's chilly out, and I've not got much blood in my veins to-night."

The speaker hopped across the room and bounded up into an arm-chair at the table, where he turned upon the city ferret a queer-looking face.

It was the face of a boy, but with wrinkles over it, and old in aspect.

The eyes were small, cunning and deep-set, the hands long and skeleton-like, and the shoulders narrow and pointed.

It was a smooth face, much too old for the shoulders over which it lifted itself like a mountain peak, and the nose, thin and bloodless, looked like a hawk's beak between the eyes.

"Look here, Josey; where have you been?" cried the detective's caller. "This is my fourth trip here to-night."

"I have been out, Splinters—up town on business."

"Up town?" was the exclamation.

"Isn't there work for you down here where the streets are narrow and the shadows many? What takes you up town in the land of the Four Hundred, where all people are good, and where they only need wings to fly away and be at rest? See here, Josey; why don't you look over in Hell's Kitchen for your next case? What's up town for you?"

The little face seemed to lose some of its age, and the eyes no longer snapped.

"What's in the Kitchen for me, Splinters?" asked the ferret.

"Nothing yet, but there's no telling—no telling, I say, Josey," was the answer. "But the fright I had a while ago! Why, it scared me out of a year's growth, and the queer part of it is that it was right out yonder."

"In my hallway?"

"No place else. I came back the second time to look in on you, when what should I see but something in the corner of the corridor crouched like a big animal."

"And you ran away?"

"Gods! what else had I to do?" cried Splinters. "Do you think I ought to have staid and let it take me?"

"But it may have been harmless."

"It wasn't harmless. See here. You've got a match, Josey?"

"Yes."

The detective rose and struck a match on the door as he opened it.

Splinters dropped from his chair and followed him.

They went into the dark corridor together, and the detective led the way to the corner designated by his visitor.

"He was right there," said Splinters, pointing toward the spot.

Joe Nichols held his burning match to the floor and bent forward, watched without a sound by his companion.

"The corner's empty," said the ferret. "It is now, but it wasn't a while ago."

"That may be, Splinters, but you see there's no one here now."

"But look at the marks of nails on the floor! That proves that some one was here."

Joe swept the match back along the floor and held it close to the greasy boards.

"It's a heel mark."

"Yes, and did you ever see nails in a heel just like that one makes?"

"What's queer about them, Splinters?"

"Why, they make a cross on the floor."

"I see that, but—"

"And there's where he rested his hand against the wall while he watched and waited."

The Home-run Detective turned and gave the shrewd little man a searching look.

"You've investigated this spot before, Splinters."

"As I live, I haven't, but there's where he rested his hand all the same. See the long fingers like mine, Joseph. Look how they touched the wall, leaving a mark, just like the boot heel on the floor. I say, Joe, that man was waiting for you to come back, but, seeing me, maybe he concluded to go away."

"When was he here?"

The little man with the thin face thought a moment.

"Maybe an hour ago."

"I was up town then. I was investigating a new case."

"Praps he knew it, and was waiting for you to come back."

"We can't tell, Splinters."

Once more the detective and his friend were back in the former's quarters.

"It's a new case, is it, Josey?"

"Yes, new and strange."

"Would you mind giving me a hint of what it is?"

"No. It is a murder case—a mysterious death in one of the mansions on the avenues."

"A gilt-edged affair!" smiled Splinters, leaning over the table with his pointed chin resting on the edge of the cloth. "How did they do it, Joe?"

"With a dagger."

"In the heart?"

"Yes, downward, through the neck."

"What's his name, Josey?"

"You don't know him, Splinters; but his name is Duke Daniels."

The little man fell back with a cry, almost dragging the tablecloth after him.

"That man?" he cried, pausing in the midst of his astonishment a few feet from the table. "That's the very man I wanted some one to finish."

"You, Splinters? In the name of heaven, what was Duke Daniels to you?"

The little man came forward, his hands shut, and his face white and tensely drawn.

"And they've found him at last? They reached the heart with the dagger, which could not be reached any other way? Dead! and the case in your hands, Joe? Well, well, this is news. And what will become of the girl now?—what will she do in the big house all by herself?"

"Do you know her?"

"I know the whole kit of them," snapped Splinters. "I know the story of the family, and I could give you a clew, but I won't. Not for the millions of Fifth Avenue would I put you, friends though we are, upon the trail. Why, Josey, it makes my blood run like fire through my veins to hear that Duke Daniels got it at last, and that the beauty of the mansion is fatherless. Go out and look for the clew! go and hunt for the hand. But you won't find them; no, no! If Splinters can come between you and success, Joe Nichols, he'll do it. Remember that!"

The little man threw wide the door, and with the last word on his lips bounded into the hall, leaving the detective in a maze of wonder.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK OF A SECRET.

In the ten years during which Joe Nichols and Splinters had been friends nothing had come between them.

The detective had saved the life of the little man, and thus secured his good will and friendship, and on more than one occasion Splinters had returned the compliment.

He lived in one of the dark districts of New York, some distance from Genteel Joe's quarters, and he knew the whole of it like a book, the narrow, tortuous alleys, the winding passages in and out; the shadows, the sewers, the dingy corridors, where evil and poverty stopped and consulted, and, in short, all the corners of squalor and filth.

And now, to be told that he (Splinters) would do all in his power to baffle him on the new trail, that he would throw in his way every obstacle possible, was like a thunderclap from a clear sky at noonday.

What did Splinters know about Duke Daniels, the victim of the dagger?

What did the poor wretch mean when he said he had long hoped some one would invade the nabob's mansion and orphan Miss Lotty?

Why did he hate Duke Daniels?

It was Splinters's secret, and the detective determined to wrest it from him.

Already Joe had reported the crime to the proper authorities, and the second editions of the morning newspapers would startle the city with the story of the death stab.

The Home-run Detective knew this.

He waited a short time after Splinters's departure.

The little man had doubtless gone back to the nest he inhabited, and thither Joe Nichols bent his footsteps.

He drew up in front of a door at the foot of a few stone steps leading below the sidewalk, and rapped.

The door opened with a squeak.

The person who confronted Joe was not Splinters.

The light of the lamp fell upon the dwarfish figure of a man older than the detective's friend, and he looked at Joe with a half shudder.

"Well, Carl?" said Joe.

The old man showed two rows of yellow teeth, but did not reply.

"Where's your lodger?"

Carl shook his head.

"He came in a while ago, didn't he?"

"No."

"Will you let me look, Carl?"

For a moment the man with the lamp hesitated, and then he led Joe across the room and opened a door.

"In there's his nest."

The detective leaned forward while the light revealed the interior of the foul smelling place.

The couch against the wall had not been tumbled that night.

"Splinters hasn't come in yet," said Carl.

The detective leaned against the wall and bade the old man set the lamp down.

"How long have you known him, Carl?"

"Twenty years."

"You're ten ahead of me."

"Yes, he said so once."

"Oh, he has talked of me here?"

"He has told me of his friend Joe, the thief-taker, and you're Joe, eh?"

"Perhaps, Carl. Splinters is a queer genius."

"There's only one Splinters, Joe."

"And one of the kind's enough, I guess."

"The world couldn't afford two—I've told him that to his face, ha, ha."

It was a villainous grin, which did not enhance the speaker's looks in the flare of the lamp.

"Why don't you get at his secrets?"

"That wouldn't do me any good, for he keeps them too well."

"He's got them, has he?"

"Like you and me," and Carl, with another laugh, ventured to lay one of his fingers upon the ferret's sleeve.

"Of course, Carl. Now this secret of Splinters—the little one about his one hatred—I never knew him to have but the one—is somewhat interesting, and I would like to get at it."

"Ask him," broke in the man listening to Joe. "You saved his life once, and Splinters told me that he'd give his last drop of blood to save yours."

"I believe he would, Carl, but when it comes to getting a secret from him—that's quite another matter. Splinters knows a thing or two—"

"Who knows it better than he? Won't tell you, eh?"

"Not a word will he let out."

"And it's about a hate?"

"Yes. He holds a grudge against a certain man—an old grudge, one that has festered in his heart."

"It's funny," said Carl, in a reflective mood. "I didn't know he ever had a real Simon-pure secret. It may be bosh, after all, Mr. Joe, mere bosh."

"It's the truth; Splinters has a secret which just now might make light that which is dark."

A sudden inspiration seemed to flash across Carl's mind.

His weakened features seemed to light up with a gleam of triumph, and he caught the ferret's arm.

"I know where his strong box is," he exclaimed.

"He has a treasury, then?"

"Yes—a place where he must keep some things very precious to him and to no one else."

"Let me see it, Carl."

The old fellow picked up the lamp and led the way across the apartment.

In one corner he dropped upon his knees and lifted a dirty curtain hanging along the wall.

At the same time he turned upon the detective a face seamed with victory.

"Here's the place. See, he set the old iron safe in the wall himself ten years ago. It's not hard for a burglar to open for it's a key safe, but mebbe you—"

Joe Nichols was bending over the strange treasure house, an old second-hand safe roughly set into the wall and showing signs of age.

Its door had once been ornamented with flowers, but time and dirt had obliterated them, and nothing now remained but the blackened iron and the greasy brass knob.

"One could almost put the treasure house in his pocket," continued old Carl.

"It wouldn't tire a gamin to carry it off."

In another minute the detective had succeeded in picking the simple lock and had swung the door open.

"You're not going to rob the safe, Joe?"

"No."

"All right. I'll go out and watch, and if Splinters comes back I'll hold him off till you're through."

"That's it, Carl. You'll earn my everlasting gratitude if you succeed."

The old man stepped back and vanished, leaving the detective alone in Splinters' room with the lamp on the floor beside him.

He found a mass of stuff in the little safe.

Here and there were old-fashioned watches and other trinkets collected by Splinters during a singular life which never had seen him beyond the pale of poverty.

"Why, Splinters is a veritable miser," said the detective with a smile. "He treasures these worthless old things as the miser keeps his hordes of gold. I'll have to get the secret elsewhere. It's not here."

As he spoke the detective pulled out a little package not longer than his hand, and he gave it more than a passing look.

It was securely tied, and not intending to let Splinters know that he had visited the place, he worked till he had mastered the knots, when the covering of the contents fell back.

Joe bent over the light with the package in his hands.

He opened it slowly and shook the dust of years from it as he did so.

"It must be his keepsake. Perhaps I have unearthed the story of Splinters' one love affair."

The following instant he was looking at two objects that riveted his gaze.

In his hand, but on the cloth which he had disturbed, lay a dagger driven

through a gold ring, which had been forced along the steel to the hilt of the blade.

Joe tried to loosen the ring, but could not.

"It's a queer thing for Splinters to have. It's the last thing I would have looked for in this safe. But what's this?"

He held the dagger closer to the light. He saw a tracery of letters on it, and on the ring he saw a crest and the letters, "V. V.," and the date, "1880."

All this was Greek to the detective, but still it interested him.

He looked from the daggered ring to the yellowish paper which had enclosed it.

There was writing on the discolored surface, and he held the paper near the light.

"Splinters may have done this," he said. "It looks a little like his scrawl. But, Gods! he wouldn't have penned such words as these;" and then he read:

"The ring belonged to her; the dagger is consecrated to vengeance. Unless its mate finds his heart within ten years from this date, then this blade shall."

The date appeared beneath the threat. Genteel Joe looked at it and gave a quick start.

The next day would complete the ten years!

With a thrill which he could not master, the detective looked up after his startling find.

Once more he returned to the lettering on the steel of the dagger.

It was a scrawl no longer, as if the discovery of the writing on the paper had disclosed all.

He felt the full importance of the find, and in another minute he had mastered the motto on the blade:

"I find, I slay, I keep my secret!"

The ferret wrapped the dagger and ring in its covering, tied the whole as before, dusted the package, and slipped it back into its place in the safe.

After this he returned the other things to their places, shut the door, and locked the treasure once more.

The face of Carl appeared as he turned away.

"Not yet," said the old man. "Maybe Splinters won't nest here to-night!"

"Does he often remain out till morning?"

"A good deal of late."

"You don't know where he goes."

"No. He has a friend, for he mysteriously talks about him now and then, a word or two—nothing more."

"It is like Splinters. Is his friend a woman?"

"No; a man. I have discovered this much, for I once found his torn card on the floor of the nest."

"Where is it?"

Carl went back to the front of the den and set the lamp on a table.

He rummaged in a box which contained a thousand and one things, and finally fished up a piece of card which, he extended, with a grin.

"You see, it is not much," said he, apologetically. "It's but the end of a name—"

"And an address," finished Joe.

The detective had taken in all there was on the torn card at a glance, and it was merely: "...umps. No. 99 P—St."

"You don't want this, Carl?"

"Heavens, no! Don't tell Splinters that I helped you to-night."

"Secret for secret, Carl. I wasn't here at all to-night, remember. I didn't open the safe, and I didn't ask for Splinters."

The old man bowed, while his little eyes glittered.

CHAPTER V.

THREE OF A KIND.

While these events were occurring in and about the home of the detective's friend, in another part of the city other scenes were taking place which we must chronicle.

It was past the hour of midnight, and a shadow which had been thrown against more than one building by the street lamps flitted up a tall and handsome house and stopped at the door.

There was a light beyond the door, but the crimson curtain which was down did not let the most prying eye look beyond the portal.

On the glass was the name, "Jared Baker, M. D.," and below it the lettering which told at what hours he might be found at home for service.

The shadow rang the night bell, although the doctor was not a night one, and the sound swept through the house in silvery tones.

In a moment easy feet came to the door, which was opened, and Doctor Baker, carrying in his hands the strangest of objects, answered the ring in person.

"You? Come in."

This was all he said, when into the house popped the late caller, and the doctor led the way to a large room, still toying with the living object in his hands.

His visitor was younger than himself, but was a handsome man, with a striking physique and well dressed.

He took a chair without an invitation, and looked at the doctor.

There was a good deal of resemblance between these two men.

It was not only facial, but physical, and their eyes were of the same color.

Doctor Baker threw his pet on the table, where it coiled itself around the stem of the lamp, and looked at the men with little eyes that seemed to blaze.

"You've heard, I suppose, that the steamer has arrived?" said the caller, looking at the doctor.

"I knew she was due."

"She is here, but he did not come."

A little smile, barely perceptible, came to the corners of Baker's mouth, and rested there.

"You mean you haven't seen him yet?"

"No, I mean that he didn't come on the Paris. I have looked at the list of passengers."

"And you didn't see his name on the list?"

"I did not. I know his writing, and it is not possible for him, even if he took the freak, to deceive me."

"Then it's a disappointment," quietly assumed Doctor Baker, casting a look at the yellow-spotted reptile straightening out on the table cloth.

"It's a brutal delay," snapped the other. "I would give a thousand dollars to see him to-night."

With a chuckle Baker held out his hand.

"Count out the coin!" he exclaimed.

The other looked at him with astonishment, and then threw a quick glance around the room.

"You've been fooling me. He is here," he said.

At that moment a door behind the doctor's chair flew open, and a man stepped forward.

The doctor's visitor rose and started forward.

He held out his hands with a cry, and grasped those which were extended to greet him.

The new comer was tall and elegantly built.

He had clear blue eyes, and his beard was thick and as white as snow.

More than this: he was superbly dressed, and about him lurked an air of nobility.

"I didn't think you would disappoint us," said Doctor Baker's visitor.

"Not for the world would I have done so. You didn't see my name in the passenger list simply because I came over under another's."

"A good idea!"

All three laughed at this.

"Well, major, how goes it?" he suddenly asked, turning again to Baker's caller.

"Fairly well. But there's the man in the way—there's the man who knows too

"Yes, yes, but wait. The doctor tells me that—"

A glance from Baker seemed to check the speaker, for he did not complete his sentence.

"Hang it all," cried the major—Major Trumps, as many called him—"Hang it all, I say, am I never to get hold of the prize? Don't you gentlemen know that while he lives I can't do a thing?"

"Yes, but I'm here," laughed the steamer's passenger. "You must remember, major, that I'm a host."

"I do. I never can forget that—never; but there's the danger, I say. Just think of it—a royal fortune almost within our grasp, and only one life between us and it."

"This little fellow would end that," and Whitebeard held the reptile above his head.

"Hang your snakes!" cried Major Trumps. "I don't believe in such agents. I can find better, but you must do something."

"It shall be done, major; only have a little patience."

"I'm growing old."

"I am old, and my friend, the doctor here, isn't far from it."

Major Trumps nervously ran one of his hands through his beard, but he did not speak.

"She's devilishly pretty, but if she isn't in our hands, what's the difference if she has all the beauty of Venus?" he suddenly growled.

"The doctor has just told me that she is a beauty," said the passenger.

"She is. She has his ways, and she's cool in danger. Don't you remember the night of the hurricane, Octave? Don't you recall how he issued his commands with the coolness of a veteran, and saved our precious necks?"

"I guess we'll never forget that night."

"I've dreamed of it a hundred times, but that is not to hold us back."

"No."

The snake was tossed across Doctor Baker's wrist, and the white-bearded man rose and stretched himself.

Major Trumps seemed to look up and measure him with envy, but he said nothing.

"I haven't quite got my land legs back," said Whitebeard.

He walked across the room as he spoke, and then began to pace it restlessly and like one glad to find himself on land again.

"Tell me," he suddenly exclaimed, halting in front of Major Trumps and the doctor, "What ever became of the little man with the shiny eyes?"

Doctor and major exchanged glances full of meaning.

"Why do you ask?" queried the latter.

"I just happened to think of him. You remember him, don't you? I do. What's become of him, I ask?"

"Do you want to see him?"

"I do and I do not."

"Well, then, you needn't to," said Major Trumps.

"Which means that he's in the city."

"He is here," said Doctor Baker. "They call him Splinters now for want of a better name; but you needn't run across him while you're here. We'll arrange that, won't we, major?"

"Certainly. Octave needn't see him at all, and Splinters won't stand in anybody's road."

"That's good; but if he gives me any trouble—if this little specimen of nerves and muscle gets between me and my plans I'll fix him in a jiffy."

"And we'll help," said both the doctor and the major in a breath. "Don't let Splinters give you a moment's bother. Now, when shall the stroke fall?"

"Don't be in a hurry."

"We may put it off till too late. Life's uncertain."

"Death is certain," answered Doctor Baker, his face getting a trifle white. "Wait; I want to show you something."

He quitted the room, but in a moment came back, carrying under his arm a

"Another experiment in death," said Major Trumps, looking at the steamer's passenger.

The cage was placed on the cloth, and in an instant the little serpent that had dropped to the floor was lifted up and thrown forward.

The light penetrating the cage showed a group of guinea pigs, and Doctor Baker, thrusting in his hand, pulled out one which blinked its eyes in the light.

"I didn't come here to see a pig die," said Major Trumps, with some impatience. "I came on weightier business and—"

"Sit down, major. It's a new experiment."

"It's as old as the law. I know what it is. A reptile bites a guinea pig and the little creature dies. The bite of that little devil is death, and the scientific world has never found an antidote for its venom."

"What would one be worth, major?"

"All you could name, doctor."

"Then I'll name a big pile. See?"

The little animal, crouching under the lamp, watched its enemy gliding over the green cloth toward it with sparkling eyes.

Suddenly the reptile darted forward, almost quitting the table with its coils, and the animal was in its grasp.

"Bravo!" cried the steamer's passenger.

Doctor Baker merely smiled, and Major Trumps dropped his head.

The guinea pig received the fangs of the serpent in its neck.

All at once the pig fell back and lay like a dead animal on the cloth.

"It's all over," said the major.

"There was nothing remarkable in that. The labarri has conquered—that's all."

"Now wait and see what man does," replied Jared Baker, picking up the animal and whisking a phial of reddish liquid from beneath his coat.

"You don't claim to have found what the scientific men of the tropics have hunted in vain for for centuries?" cried Major Trumps, almost quitting his chair.

There was no reply.

Doctor Baker drew the animal toward him and placed the phial between its lips.

In a moment the guinea pig revived; its eyes, glassy a moment before, got a natural look, and in a minute it ran back to its mates seemingly none the worse.

"Wonderful!" cried Major Trumps. "You have found a fortune. Now go out and sweep it in."

"No. It's merely pastime. Let the serpent kill its thousands. I don't care to save. It's simply a triumph of science."

"But perhaps your antidote would not save a human life."

"I'll show you."

Doctor Baker picked up the reptile and caught the major's hand.

"Gods! don't try it on me," exclaimed that worthy, breaking loose. "I'll take it for granted that you have found the antidote for that terrible bite. But hang your serpents! they can't help us out of the present hole—"

"They can. They kill, and what is more, without me there is no coming back to life."

"Then why don't you make him a present of one of them?"

Jared Baker's face did not change color when he answered:

"I turned two of them loose in his house not long ago."

"Gods! what if they should bite the girl?" cried Major Trumps.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE MAJOR MAKES AN APPOINTMENT.

It was another day when Genteel Joe went back to the scene of the mysterious crime.

Long before the murder had been heard at police headquarters and the authorities had taken charge of the matter.

The detective entered the house, and

him with a face that told that he had something of importance to communicate.

"I've killed it," said he.

"The snake?"

"Yes. It's in my room. Come up and see it."

Joe followed Savage up-stairs into a room, the door of which the coachman shut carefully before he spoke again.

"It was in the library. I watched for his snake-ship, and caught him as he poked his head out from under one of the cases. The moment I saw it I went for the shiny thing, and landed my game in great shape. I pinned him to the carpet, and didn't let up till I had him dead."

"Where is it?"

Sam Savage took a box from the mantel and opened it.

Genteel Joe leaned over the little box and looked at the reptile, half coiled in the bottom.

"I'll look for more," said Sam, "and if that demon doctor fetches another cage of these things here, why, he'll take himself and his serpents off in a jiffy."

"See that he does, Savage."

On the staircase, midway down, the detective saw a man emerge from the library, and he stopped at once.

This person looked up at him, and seemed to show his teeth in a smile.

In the hallway the stranger waited for Joe, and when the ferret had descended he said:

"You don't know me, but you are the detective who is to take charge of this case? My name is Trumps."

"Yes, sir."

"I am a friend of the family, knew the deceased very well, and am here in any capacity in which I can be used."

"I don't know that I can use you, sir," said Joe. "Time may come when you can be of service to me, and if you will give me your address I will communicate with you when I think best."

"With pleasure," and the other drew from his pocket a card case, from which he drew a card the exact counterpart of the torn one Joe had received from "Carl."

A glance showed the detective the name of "Major Jackson Trumps, No. 99 P—Street, City"—the same address which adhered to the bit of card-board then in his bosom.

"At any time, sir," said the major, as he handed the card over. "I am ever at your service. Bad thing, this sudden death, and, what is more, it's murder."

Genteel Joe at this moment heard the voice of some one in the parlor, and he opened the door, to come face to face with Doctor Baker.

The face of the doctor was calm and expressionless, but the moment he saw Joe he looked away.

Genteel Joe crossed the room, and stopped at the window, and not far from a silent figure that did not stir, but looked at him with meaning glance.

Miss Lotty, with white face and hands, had just come down from her room, and now stood at the window, looking out upon the street through a rift in the curtains.

Joe saw that she wanted to speak to him, and he came closer, addressing her in low tones.

"I am here once more, miss," said he. "Savage tells me that he killed a serpent in the library."

"Yes."

The girl started and looked at the detective, her face seeming to light up for a moment, when the old pallor came back once more.

"It was not the last one he left with us that night. Doctor Baker is not the friend I want in this hour of dark trial. A man who toys with death in the shape of serpents cannot secure my esteem."

If the doctor heard these words he made no sign, but in another moment he had quietly withdrawn.

"Did you see it?" cried Lotty.

"The reptile?"

"Yes, yes."

"Savage took me to where it was and showed it to me."

"I saw it, too. It looks like a death agent, though it is not thicker than one's finger. He let these reptiles escape that night. That's what he fetched them here for."

"Would he do this, Miss Lotty? Why should Doctor Baker turn loose a lot of snakes in this house?"

"He knows and I can guess. Did you see the man who calls himself Major Trumps? You may have seen him, for he came shortly after Doctor Baker arrived this morning, and may be here still."

"I met him as I came down from Savage's room."

"These men are close friends. I never heard father mention the name of Jackson Trumps, though this man told me that years ago they used to be well acquainted. It may be, though. Father never told me about himself; there seemed to be one or two hidden chapters in his life, and I never pressed him for them."

"You never saw this Major Trumps here before to-night?"

"No."

There came to the door a footstep that stopped there, but no one came in.

"Did you hear that?" cried the girl, her ear catching the sound, light as it was.

The detective nodded.

"It may have been Major Trumps, the bane of my life. He walks like a panther in his cage, and his voice sounds evil in my ears. That man is to be mixed up in my life. I feel it."

Joe walked over to the door, taking care not to make a noise on the soft carpet, but the moment he opened it he smiled.

No one was in sight.

He heard voices in the library just across the hall, but not a human being could he see.

He came back to the waiting girl and reported.

"It was a footstep," said Lotty. "We heard it, Mr. Nichols. The house isn't haunted. Major Trumps is here for no good. But wait. I want to show you the papers."

She left the room, and came back with a package of papers in her hands.

"What shall I do with these? They were found in the desk in the library. I found them there this morning, and he must have been looking at them lately, for papers of this sort he would naturally keep under lock and key."

"You may hold your father's will in your hands."

"That is true, and that is why I want to know what I shall do with them."

"You might lock them in the safe till after all is over."

"Thanks. I had thought of that, Mr. Nichols. I will do it, but, as the library is occupied now, I will take them to my jewel safe and secure them there."

Once more the detective was left alone in the parlor, and for a moment he heard the sound of Lotty Daniels's footsteps on the stairs.

The moment she left him some one came to the door, and it opened softly, to admit Major Trumps.

"Alone, are you, Nichols?" said this worthy, slipping forward in a manner which recalled Lotty's comparison. "I'm glad of it. I would like to see you in private, but not here. Could you drop around to my house, say to-night? Set your own hour."

"I can come at seven."

"That will do. I will expect you. I want to get to the bottom of this affair as soon as possible, and I may be able to give you a little clew."

Half an hour afterward the detective stood on a corner not far from his own quarters, with the whirr of the busy city round him.

He was watching the movements of a figure which he well knew, and when it turned a block he hastened across the street and took after it.

Splinters did not suspect that the detective was so near, for he counted

along, keeping out of the crowds, and at last stepping up to a house, the bell of which he rang.

As the figure of Splinters whisked itself out of sight a smile passed over the ferret's face, and he waited thirty minutes for his reappearance.

Not far away rolled the river, with its countless craft, and beyond in the sunlight glistened the waters of the bay.

Splinters seemed to give the detective a long and useless vigil, but at last he came out and put off.

He looked cautiously about as he came down the steps and started away, swinging his thin body in a peculiar movement, and carrying Genteel Joe from one street to another.

"Splinters!"

The little man stopped.

As he turned he caught sight of the detective, and a cold light danced up in his eyes.

Perhaps he recalled their last meeting and his threat.

"This way, Splinters," continued Joe. "I don't intend to take you to my den, but we'll talk a moment in another place. 'Tommy's' will do."

"All right, go to 'Tommy's.'"

Splinters turned of his own accord, and in another minute the pair were seated in the back room of a small wine-shop, with a table between them.

The place known as "Tommy's" was not very well lighted, and the face of Splinters looked darker than usual in the shades of the chamber.

"What is it, Joe?" demanded the little man.

"It's not much, Splinters; I merely brought you here to look at you and to see if you really meant what you said in my den."

Splinters winced a little and drew back.

"You threatened me—me—Joe."

"I know I did."

"But you didn't mean it, Splinters?"

"Why didn't I?"

"Why should you try to keep my hands from avenging a foul murder? You don't want to link your name with a crime like the one which took place in Duke Daniels's mansion?"

The lips of Splinters met, but he did not speak.

"It would almost make you an accessory," said the detective.

"I'm not that. Have a care how you accuse me, Joe."

"All right; but you must play fair with me."

"I will."

"But when you threaten me, and tell me that if I do so and so you will try to balk me, Splinters, I intend to discover the hand that killed last night, and if you stand between me, remember that you will be swept from my path like chaff."

The face of Splinters dropped a degree, and his eyes sought the floor.

All the time Genteel Joe was watching him like a hawk.

Would Splinters retract and disclose the secret which he kept so well, or would he show his teeth like a hyena and growl?

"Have you found a clew yet?" he suddenly asked.

"I will have one before morning."

"A true one, Joe—a real good hunting clew?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I'm glad of that—really, I hope it will prove a good clew, but let me tell you one thing. Keep your eyes open and don't sleep on this trail. I know what I'm talking about, and if you fail don't blame Splinters for not warning you in time."

That was all; the lips of Splinters came together again, and he was as dumb as an oyster.

CHAPTER VII.

GENTEEL JOE AND MAJOR TRUMPS.

Genteel Joe awaited with a good deal of curiosity the hour agreed upon for his interview with Major Trumps.

No. 99 P—Street was a quiet place.

borhood, and he had investigated it a little.

Major Trumps was an exclusive individual, who was not known outside the house he occupied, and who, as a neighbor, did not enjoy the confidence of his fellow-beings.

The house was a two-story brick, with tight shutters which, from their appearance, did not open very often to let the sunlight in, and the bell showed but few signs of having been recently rung.

The hour set apart for the interview was quite early, and at the very minute the City Shadow presented himself on the steps.

His hand had barely touched the bell ere the door was opened, and Major Trumps, with eager countenance, stood just beyond.

He ushered Genteel Joe into a room to one side of the little corridor, where he turned the gas a trifle higher, letting it flood the place with light, and showing the detective a room plainly furnished after the manner of a man of the world.

"It's my nest—not a very fine one, but good enough for the bird that occupies it," smiled the Major, as he waved his visitor to a seat, which was taken at once.

Genteel Joe waited for his host to proceed, which Major Trumps did, as he pushed a box of Havanas toward his guest.

"It is about the affair on the avenue that I wish to see you," he said. "I happen to know a little about the early life of Duke Daniels, and I thought that a chapter from it might throw some light upon his death."

"It might. Clews are what we want just now."

"Exactly. Clews, and then the closing in. That's it. We want first the trail, and the rest follows as a natural sequence."

Major Trumps blew a wreath of smoke ceilingward, and rested his elbow on the table.

"I first met Duke Daniels twenty years ago. We were fellow-travelers on the continent, and spent some time together in Paris. At that time he was not the wealthy man he afterward became, but he had a fair share of this world's goods, and was contemplating marriage."

"We visited the sights of gay Paris, and became fast friends, to part afterward in Rome, and not to meet again till this morning, when I saw my friend dead in his own mansion. I would never have dreamed of such a meeting twenty years ago."

"During our rambles through Paris we came across all sorts and conditions of men. Daniels was a passionate man, a man full of the spirit of liberty, so much so that one night we nearly got into trouble by his declaration of rights in a cafe."

"It came about in a flash. A dark-faced little man, whom we afterward learned was one of the most noted duellists of Paris—the Count Something-or-other—made a remark which inflamed my friend, and in an instant he had broken a bottle over the Frenchman's head. It was all I could do to keep the count from running Daniels through with his sword, but I managed to get between the two and to get my friend out of the cafe, though a howling mob thundered at our heels."

"I don't suppose Daniels forgot that incident to the day of his death. He used to insist that I saved his life on that occasion, though I would have done the same for any other American under like circumstances. It was the last I saw of the count, though I understood that he hunted the cafes for Daniels, and at last swore vengeance, saying that he would have his blood if he had to wait fifty years for the chance."

"I left him in Rome, as I have said, and we did not meet again. I knew that he was a multimillionaire in this city, but our paths are not the same, so I failed to call on him. Now he has been struck down by the hand of an assassin,

and I have but just left him in his little chamber."

Major Trumps replaced his cigar, held during the narrative between thumb and finger, and looked at the man who had waited for the end of the story.

"By the way, you never inquired the count's name?" asked Genteel Joe.

"Never did. I might have found out, but he was so contemptible that I did not think of it at the time. He was one of those small, wiry fellows, who are all nerves and coolness, for in all my life I never saw such a face as that which leered over our table that night in the cafe, while a naked sword wanted to sheathe itself in Daniels's heart. I would have called the count out and shot him, but, as he was a swordsman and would have chosen rapiers, I would have been left on the grass for my pains."

"It cannot be, major, that the old quarrel in the Parisian cafe has anything to do with last night's crime?"

"There's no telling. The oath of the count may have entered into the dark matter, and I thought I would mention it to you."

Joe Nichols saw the face half concealed behind a whiff of smoke, and noticed that the eyes were sparkling with eagerness.

"Dr. Baker tells me that the death of Daniels was caused by a stab in the neck."

"It was."

"The blade of the dagger reached the heart?"

"Yes."

"Now, if the assassin only had left anything behind that would give you a clew—"

"He left something behind," broke in the detective.

"Indeed? In the house?"

Genteel Joe drew from his pocket a sheet of paper, which he proceeded to open before the major.

"He left this," said he, looking up and catching the cold gray eyes watching not him, but the document. "This was found on a table in the house, but not in the library."

"But, see! It has been pierced with something."

"It was pierced with a dagger."

"Good! With the blade that did the work at the desk?"

"I think not. You see the outlines of the coffin on the sheet and the name of the victim written across it."

"It is true—the villain!" cried Major Trumps, leaning forward and trying to read the writing on the sheet before him.

"It looks like a vendetta."

"Just what the count would have made in his passion. Great Caesar, Nichols, do you think he had a hand in it?"

"That lies in the future. We will find out the motive and then nail the man."

"Do it! You'll be doing me a favor if you do."

"It shall be done," cried Joe, with positiveness. "This is a dark affair, no doubt of that, but light will come, and your friend will be avenged, major."

"And if you find the count at the end of the trail, don't let him go. Let me have a look at him. I'll identify him, for time cannot erase his looks from my mind."

"Is this the chapter from Duke Daniels's life which you wished to impart?"

"It is one of them. I have another, but I fear that will throw no light whatever upon the trail."

"We cannot tell."

"Five years ago I came across a woman in one of the parks of this city. She was quite alone, and was habited in deep black. There was something about her which drew my attention, and I approached her to relieve her distress, if possible. At sound of my voice she started and looked up, throwing back her veil with a light cry."

"In an instant there came back to me the scene in the cafe, for on that night the French count was not alone, for he had with him a beautiful Parisian, whom I now saw for the second time. It all

came back to me in the flash of an eye, I say. The beauty in the park was the beauty of the cafe, and her face flushed deeply as she instantly seemed to recognize me."

"I did not offer to relieve her wants, for her face told me that she was not in distress, but in a few seconds I withdrew, with an apology, to be followed, I am sure, by her deep black eyes."

"You may put this and that together and make out of it whatever you can," smiled the major, resuming his cigar. "The meeting in the park told me that the fair companion of the count, a good deal older, but still fair, had not forgotten me, and I thought at the time of the count's oath. That is the second chapter of the story I want you to hear, Mr. Nichols. It belongs to you now, and I am only too glad to recall these incidents, in hopes that they may lead to the right trail, and enable justice, through you, to score a success."

The ferret looked away, and his face assumed a strange hue.

"You see, it was a dagger thrust. The count was a swordsman, and the woman—I heard afterward that she had Italian blood in her veins—you know the rest."

Major Trumps threw down his cigar and leaned back in his chair.

Genteel Joe heard a footstep beyond the door across the room, but he made no sign.

He was not alone in the house with the major.

"I thank you," said the detective. "I will see about this. There may be more in your story than you think. We often find a starting point far back of the deed."

"I thought so."

"Success to you. If you don't find the hand it won't be your fault. I've heard of you—a keen, cool-headed ferret, and just the man to undertake this mission."

Joe pretended to be flattered by the major's praise, and admitted it.

In another minute he stood near the door, hat in hand, with his face turned toward the portal beyond which he had heard the velvety step.

"You're always to be found here, major?" said he.

"Always, or nearly so."

"You know Doctor Baker?"

"Yes, and a nice gentleman he is, too. One of those men you can trust and admire. He will give you all the assistance he can in this matter."

"Yes—a man with a cool head on his shoulders," said the detective, and then he bowed his way out, and stood once more under the lights of New York.

He looked back at the house behind him, and saw between the slats of one of the windows a face outlined, and a pair of keen, flashing eyes.

It vanished almost the moment he looked, and he walked away.

If he had looked into the room he had just vacated he would have seen Major Trumps standing at the table, with a glass of wine poised in his effeminate hand.

All at once he laughed, and set the goblet down.

"Count on me for a good play," said he to himself, but aloud. "I haven't lost any of my old cunning, and I'm just as cool headed as I was ten years ago. By Jove! I'm rightly named. I'm Trumps by name and trumps by nature!"

Then he threw himself into a chair at the table, and drew toward him a sheet of paper, which he began to cover with writing at a rapid rate.

Ten minutes afterward Genteel Joe Nichols climbed the stairs to his little quarters near Broadway, and unlocked the door.

As he turned on the gas he heard a springy footfall in the hall beyond, and the door, as it was thrust open, gave him a glimpse of a face.

A paper fell at his feet, and the footsteps went back.

Joe sprang forward and picked up the paper, opening it at the same time.

The next moment he uttered a startling exclamation.

CHAPTER VIII.
DIPPS.

The detective held in his hand a bit of paper on which had been scrawled a startling message.

He read it at a glance, and then, looking toward the door, he sprang across the room, and in another moment was looking into the hall.

No one was in sight.

Still gripping the paper, Genteel Joe ran down the steps to the sidewalk and looked right and left.

The lights showed him the sidewalk to the nearest corner, and he saw fully twenty people.

But from among them he did not dare try to single out the person he had not even seen—the bearer of the letter.

"A little too late," said Joe, as he went slowly back, and in his quarters he dropped into his arm-chair.

Once more his gaze fell upon the lines before him.

Once more he read:

"Major Trumps is a liar from 'way back. Not one word of truth in the yarn he spun to-night. There is no French count and no veiled woman in the park. Watch the major."

A. FRIEND."

More than once the detective read these lines, and as often reflected.

Truth to tell, he had doubted the story told by Major Trumps.

He believed that he had been invited to the place to be stuffed with a narrative invented for the purpose.

Genteel Joe folded the paper at last and put it away.

He had scrutinized the writing, but had failed to recognize it.

If "A Friend" had really brought it to his door, why conceal himself by sneaking off in the light and shadows and not let him confirm the story of the paper?

Joe Nichols had received a good many surprises in his time, but this was one of the mysterious sort.

He bolted from the room at last, as if for want of a better plan, and appeared on the street.

This time he was not looking particularly for the bearer of the message.

A few minutes later he turned up in another part of the city and looked across a small room into the face of a man about his own age.

"Here, Judson," said he, taking the letter from his pocket and tossing it into the man's lap. "Here's something for you. I don't come to see you very often, but when I do come I have some work for you."

Judson, the expert in chirography, smiled and slowly opened the letter, which he spread on the green baize table before him.

Genteel Joe leaned back and waited.

"It's a plain case," said the expert.

"It's almost too plain to talk over."

"What is?"

"Why, the identity of the writer of these lines."

"He tells it all in his writing, does he?"

"Couldn't have done it better if he had pinned his photograph to the sheet."

"Very well; go on, Judson."

"Here's a nervous, eager man who writes with his left hand and who would not do anything by day that he could do by night. Why, look at the formation of these t's and the queer dots over the i's. It's character personified. Nothing plainer ever came to my workshop, Joe. Don't you know a left-handed man, nervous, and of the character I have mapped out?"

Joe reflected.

"I know a little fellow who sometimes uses his left hand—"

"Ambidextrous, is he? Well, that description might fit in this case. I should say he could write with his right hand, but this is left-handed work."

"I used to know a person of this sort, but he hasn't been in the city in six months; that is, not that I've seen."

"He may have come back. He was a friend of yours, eh?"

"Yes, yes. I fished him out of the river one night just before I did Splinters a like turn, but Dipps isn't about now."

"He may have come back."

"If he did there's one place he'd break for—the old nest in Doyers Street."

"You might try it. But what's up? What about this story which one Major Trumps has spun you?"

Genteel Joe looked across the table and smiled.

"You don't read the newspapers very carefully, Judson."

"Not very. I'm stupid, I know."

"It's a dark case—a bit of crime, a murder in upper tendom."

"And I missed it? Too bad!"

"You may have heard of Duke Daniels—"

"Why, I know the man. Not three months ago he came to me with some work. He wanted a letter read in my way—wanted to know if I could tell him about an anonymous writer by the writing. And my reply so pleased him that he left a double fee on the table."

"He was always liberal," said Joe. "Well, you've had him for a patron for the last time."

"You don't tell me—"

"He's the victim."

"Murdered?"

"Just so."

"Tell me, or do you want to go right out and see if Dipps has come back?"

Genteel Joe looked at his watch and concluded he had plenty of time, and settled back in the chair for the story of Duke Daniels' tragic end.

In Judson, the expert, he had an attentive auditor, and not until the story was ended was he interrupted.

"You ought to get at the motive for this crime, I believe that you will."

"I shall go straight to it when I once get started. I shall spend a little time in picking up the threads and then—then for the end of the game, Judson."

"If your strange letter writer tells the truth, you must look out for this Major Trumps."

"Leave that to me. Trumps may not hold the best hand at the end of the play, despite his name. It was a well-told tale, and the mysterious count of the cafe was as distinguished a looking hero as one would wish to encounter anywhere."

"And the veiled beauty of the park? What a vivid imagination your friend, the major has to be sure."

Judson broke into a little laugh, during which Genteel Joe rose to go.

"Try Doyers Street. I bank my reputation on the correct reading of your correspondent's character. Left-handed, eager, and nervous. You say that fits Dipps. Well, try Doyers, Joe."

"I will."

The detective, with the letter burning his pocket, walked rapidly from the house of the expert.

He had used Judson before, and knew the wonderful correctness of his readings of characters.

Turning into the street to be searched for a myth or a living person, he dodged up a flight of steps and ran into a tall tenement and almost against a man in the shadows of the hall.

Dipps had had a nest in that place, but had not been in the city for months.

Still there was the expert's story, the left-handed man, and the nervous writing.

Joe paused on the fourth floor of the dingy place.

It was one of those human bee-hives that dot the city from Harlem to the Battery.

At one end of the long corridor where he had halted was a dark shadow which his keen eye could not penetrate.

There was also a door there, and the detective, pausing before it, saw over the transom a light.

In another moment he had turned the

knob and pushed the unlocked portal open.

A cry greeted him.

As he went forward some one rose from a chair and stood before him.

The figure of a man holding a pair of scissors in his left hand threw a shadow on the wall behind him, but the detective uttered a name that was repeated in echo.

"It is Dipps!"

The man with the scissors fell back and clutched the table.

His face at first became livid and then white.

He stared at Genteel Joe, and his skin seemed to draw itself tight over his cheek bones.

"Who told you where I was?" he demanded.

"Never mind, Dipps. I'm glad to see you."

"You tracked me here."

"Did you expect to get away from me? Why did you throw the letter into the room and then slink off like a coward?"

"The letter?—the writing? I can't write."

The little man—he was thin and wiry like Splinters—held out his right hand and showed a withered member with great scars running down to the wrist.

The detective did not look long at it, but glanced at the other member and then into the man's face.

"It was a left hand's work," said he. "Sit down there, Dipps, and try the pen."

"No. Don't force me to betray myself. I thought you wouldn't find me, but when one gets away from you, Joe, they outwit fate, that's all."

"Now, Dipps, before I listen to the story of your wanderings, I want to know what you know about my friend and yarn spinner the major."

"You know that he lied to you to-night."

"So your note said. But how did you know he told any such a story?"

Once more the color fled from Dipps' face, and he winced.

"You don't intend to deny the note, Dipps?"

"No. I can't do that. It was done with my left hand."

"I know it."

"It was done to warn you. I can't go back on the man who fished me, wretch though I am, from the Hudson. But I dare not tell how I know the falsity of Major Trumps' tale."

"You don't fear him, Dipps."

"I make confession. I fear that man, Joe. I cannot tell you how during the last six months my fortunes have become linked to his. I dare not repeat the story of my fall. I belong to the man I have betrayed, but I could not help warning you. It was the old love, Joe; but I never thought of being found by you here—in the old nest."

"You have been found, Dipps. And yet, after all, knowing that this story of the count and the veiled beauty of the park is a myth, you keep back the truth. Who is Major Trumps?"

"You have his name—Major Jackson Trumps."

"But his real identity? There is something back, Dipps, something in the career of this man whose slave you are, and you are the very person to give me the right clew, for the mystery of the avenue shall be cleared up, in spite of fate."

Dipps breathed hard, and turned his face from the light.

"When I penned that note for you, Joe, it was on the spur of the moment, with the scene on the river rushing over me. When I found myself down on the street, after throwing the note into your room, I felt a demon chill at my heart, and I cut through half a dozen alleys to the old nest. Tell you what I know about Major Trumps? If I do I will be the suspected traitor, and I—I dare not, Joe."

The hand of the detectives crossed the space between them, and his eyes became

fastened upon Dipps' face, as the fingers closed round his wrist.

"You want me to fall into the hands of the slayer, do you? You have the secret, the one Splinters pretends to know. Now, Dipps, out with it. Who is Major Trumps?"

Cold sweat came out on the little man's forehead.

"I can't! I can't!" he cried. "I fear the infernal reptiles!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE BRANDED BOSOM.

"The reptiles?" queried the detective. "Come, Dipps, don't joke with me."

"It's no joke. You don't know the cunning of Major Trumps."

"But the idea of a man of your cleverness being frightened by a lot of snakes, and in New York, at that!"

"It's true," and Dipps relapsed into silence. "I would have broken away from him long ago if I could, but I cannot."

"Very well; then you can serve me."

"By betraying him? Why, my head wouldn't be worth trying to keep on my shoulders."

"But I want the truth, no matter what it costs. You don't want to stand between justice and her own."

"No, but you ask too much, Joe—too much from Dipps. Let me be! Go out and work out the mystery with the clew I have given you. Keep eye and ear open, and, above all things, don't let Major Trumps stuff you with stories about imaginary counts and mythical veiled women in city parks."

The little man with the withered hand rose, and walked the room with nervous strides.

The gaze of Genteel Joe followed him back and forth, as he walked from wall to wall, with lowered head and silent.

"You won't tell me more, eh, Dipps?" said Joe at last.

"Don't tempt me."

"You said once that you would do anything for me—anything in the world—you put it that strong, you remember—"

"I forget nothing," interrupted Dipps, pausing, and looking over at Joe.

"You said, too, that if ever you could clear up a mysterious case for me you would betray your best friend to do it."

"I did, I did!"

"Now, Dipps, what about that pledge?"

The man came back to his chair, and sank into it, his face white and ghastly.

"But there's the envenomed death," he cried. "That is the horror that confronts me."

"You mean the serpents?"

"The serpents—the pets of the demon doctor and the death agents well known to Major Trumps."

Genteel Joe leaned toward the speaker and looked him fairly in the face for half a minute.

"Dipps, you needn't tell me; I'll go to the trail, and if my hand strikes you down with the others, why don't blame Joe Nichols."

"I won't. I won't blame you, sir. I will call it justice. But I can't open my mouth now. Only, keep an eye on Major Trumps and his friends."

"His friends?"

"Yes. There! let me alone now, Joe. Time may come when I can speak, but after all what I know might not do you any good. It might not give you one thread of the crimson skein. It's a dark crime, the papers say; the old man was stabbed in his own house and no one witnessed the deed but the murderer."

Genteel Joe went to the door and looked back upon Dipps in the chair, still white and silent.

"Good-by, Joe," said he of the withered hand.

As he spoke he moved the maimed hand into the light and the detective's eyes fell upon it.

"I hadn't this when we met last," said Dipps with a smile. "I had a good hand then, but the reptiles—the infernal snakes of the demon doctor. Ah! never

mind, Joe. It was my fault and foolishness. Good-by!"

The door closed and the detective stood on the landing with a flight of steps before him.

Dipps was a queer character.

The visit had not netted Joe very much, but still enough to tell him that the man with the withered hand knew something about Major Trumps and that worthy's friends.

Dipps was the person who had thrown the warning note into his room; Dipps had followed him, probably from the major's house, and, intent on giving him a bit of valuable information even at the risk of his life, had penned the note which had betrayed him, thanks to Judson, the expert.

As for Dipps, he remained in the chair for at least ten minutes like a man in a trance.

The ferret went down to the sidewalk and thence toward his own quarters.

But Dipps sat still.

Presently there came to the little man's door a light, shuffling footstep, which stopped there.

Dipps turned his eyes wearily toward the portal and fell to watching it.

A rap sounded and the little tenant of the dirty room said: "Come in."

As the portal slid open he caught sight of a face which seemed to startle him into new life, for he not only sat bolt upright in the chair, but his eyes snapped, and the one good hand slipped over the edge of the table spasmodically.

"Who was he, Dipps?" inquired the new comer, as he shuffled forward, a short, thick man with a face of iron and grey eyes that emitted a cool, reptilian light.

Dipps looked courageous.

"What is it to you, Goldstein? What do you want?"

"Much, perhaps. Who was he—your caller?"

"Not the man you care to meet, perhaps."

"Come, no insinuations. You're not of much force, Dipps, nothing more than the major's slave and helper."

"Gods! The major! What do you know about him?"

"Never mind! Answer my question. Wasn't that man a human bloodhound?"

"What if he was?"

"Wasn't it Joe Nichols—Genteel Joe?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Why didn't you save breath and say so at first? So it was Joe Nichols—the man I have been looking for these many weeks."

"It's all right if he isn't looking for you, Goldstein."

"Silence!" thundered the other. "No insinuations, I say. When he looks for a man he generally finds him, but he's not so easy to find himself."

Dipps looked across the table at the little eyes regarding him, but his lips did not part.

"Yes," continued Goldstein, "I've been wanting to see Joe Nichols for weeks, but I was a little afraid to venture out."

"Why?"

The man suddenly bared his breast.

Upon the not very light skin was a mark at which Dipps stared with bulging eyes.

"Look well at it," smiled Goldstein, his eyes glittering. "It's a mark I'm not very proud of, but I can't help it."

"It's a brand," said Dipps.

"No matter what it is. It's there, and will remain till Goldstein passes in his checks at death's counter. It's not very pretty, and I'm not at all proud of it, I say. But, Dipps, if you had such a keepsake, would you venture on the street with thousands of eyes looking at you and ask for Joe Nichols, the best known and keenest ferret in Gotham?"

"I don't think I would," confessed Dipps.

"That's right. But, Dipps, you've got

a mark, too—the little hand on the edge of the table."

Dipps withdrew the withered hand, but not too quick for Goldstein.

"It isn't a burned hand. It don't look like that. It looks like a bitten member."

A sudden cry parted Dipps' lips, and he flinched.

"I've seen a hand just like it. It was a right hand, too. There was the drawn fingers and the scars, like cuts, running to the wrist, as if some blade had cut deep to take out the poison of fangs."

"Great heavens! man, you're a wonder!"

"I'm only Lukey Goldstein. Don't put me down in the catalogue of seers or witches. Just call me Goldstein, but, as I was saying, the other hand I saw once was scarred just like yours."

"Whose was it?"

"The owner of that hand was beautiful! She would have shone anywhere, but her hand was terrible."

"It was a shame," cried Dipps.

"It was her fault, just like that hand was yours. She looked into matters that did not concern her, and got the scars."

"Did the reptiles bite her?"

"There! I'm not saying anything about snakes. Did I mention them, Dipps?"

"No, but you spoke of fangs, and you insinuated—"

"What a mind you have! You must be a mind reader, Dipps. But since you have suggested serpents, suppose we talk about them."

"Not for the world, Goldstein! Talk on any other subject but that one. You can't draw me out. You should not try."

Goldstein leaned back in his chair, and for half a minute fixed his eyes on Dipps, the maimed.

"I see. Unpleasant subject. Very well. We don't talk about reptiles. Your hand is proof that the subject would not be a congenial one. By the way, how is the major?"

Dipps said nothing.

"Another tabooed subject, eh?"

"You are trying to irritate me. I half believe you took quarters in this house for the purpose of watching me."

"As though you were worth watching! you, a man with a withered hand."

"Yes, even that."

"See here, Dipps, my boy. Let's come to an understanding. Would you mind taking a note from me to Major Trumps?"

"I would. I am not a letter carrier. There's the Post Office, and the mail box is on the corner. You can write, Goldstein, and, what is more, I believe you know where the major lives."

"I know, but I don't care to go out," and the speaker significantly touched his breast. "I will send him a letter by you, Dipps."

"No, sir!"

"I will, fool! If you refuse I'll play a hand that may not be a pleasant one for you. Don't think that because I'm in hiding in this old beehive that I'm powerless. Come, Dipps, I'll pen the missive now and you can wait for it."

Goldstein shuffled from the room, and Dipps heard his door close upon his figure.

Five minutes later, during which time Dipps had not stirred from the chair, Goldstein came back holding in his hand a letter which was sealed with a great daub of red wax.

"Take it to the major," said he, throwing the letter on the table.

Dipps did not move.

"Come, fool and ass!" roared Goldstein, bending over the table. "Take it at once to Major Jackson Trumps and deliver it with the seal intact or—or—I'll flay you alive!"

The rounded face before Dipps was the incarnation of a storm, and the eyes seemed to bulge from his head.

Dipps picked up the missive and found it heavier than an ordinary letter.

"It won't require double postage in

your hands," said Goldstein, who, despite his name, had nothing of the Jew about him. "You can carry it in your bosom. You needn't wait for an answer. There won't be any."

Still looking him in the face, Dipps put the letter in his pocket and pushed back his chair.

"Now, sir, straight to the major! You know where to find him. Hand it to him, no matter where he be, and see that he looks underneath the waxen seal."

"What are you, Goldstein—man or devil?" cried Dipps.

"Both!" grinned the other, striking the table with his chubby hand.

CHAPTER X.

THE LIVING PACKAGE.

Dolliver Dipps departed at once on his mission.

It was a task he did not like, but the terrible threat of Goldstein drove him on.

"If I find him at home and deliver the message I'll hear an outburst of passion and maybe get my foot into it, besides," he reflected. "I know Major Trumps. I know but little about Goldstein, but the man with the mark on his breast is not as honest as he should be, for he would not be afraid to go out and post a letter a few steps from the door."

It did not take Dipps long to find the little brick house inhabited by the major.

But that worthy was not at home, for Dipps, with a familiarity which told that he was a frequent visitor at the house, entered by a latchkey and made his way to the parlor, only to find it empty.

For half a minute he stood in the room, the sole tenant, and then he left.

"There's another place to look for him," said he.

Not long thereafter he ran up the steps of Doctor Baker's residence and jerked the bell.

Dipps held the withered right hand underneath his garment, as he did so, and heard footsteps in the hall.

He stood face to face with the doctor himself, and the man of medicine eyed him for a second curiously.

"Come in. He's here," said Jared Baker, and Dipps was ushered into the house and thence to a room alongside the hall.

In this apartment he found not only Major Trumps, but a handsome white-bearded man occupying chairs, while another chair drawn close to the table showed that the doctor had just been called from a *tete-a-tete*.

"The devil! you here?" cried Major Trumps, at sight of Dipps. "What's up?"

"I've got a letter for you."

"For me. Let's have it."

Dipps hesitated even as his hand moved toward his pocket, and all three watched him with eagerness mingled with curiosity.

"It's well sealed, Major," cried the white-bearded man, as he caught sight of the letter.

"It must be a precious document," cried Doctor Baker.

Major Trumps, all seriousness, took the letter and turned it slowly in his hands.

He inspected the clumsy seal, but did not seem to recognize it at all, and then he slipped a keen blade in one end of the envelope.

Perfect silence filled the room while the major worked at his task, and when the knife was put down in order to extract the contents of the envelope, white beard and the doctor leaned forward breathlessly.

Inside the envelope was a flat package wrapped with silk thread, and this the major laid on the table.

At the same time he turned upon Dipps.

"Who sent this?" he asked.

"Goldstein."

"Gifts from Jewry!" cried white beard.

The major looked nonplussed.

"Goldstein? I know no such man."

"You might know him if you were to see him," said Dipps. "I might describe the brand he wears on his breast—"

throat, and the package fell from his hand.

"From that demon," he cried, sending a swift glance at his companions. "From that wretch?"

"Goldstein is the name I know him by."

"But I know him by another. Where is he?"

"In the same nest I occupy."

"On Doyers Street?"

"Yes, in the tall beehive, as they call the old shell."

"Lives with you and you have never posted me?"

Dipps flushed.

"How should I know that he was anything in your life?" he stammered. "If you had told me to look out for a man branded on the bosom—if you had intimated that Goldstein was your enemy—I would have posted you long ago."

"True! I don't blame you, Dipps. But he made you his messenger to-night, did he?"

"Yes."

Once more Major Trumps's gaze fell upon the package on the cloth, and his hand waved Dipps toward the hall.

"Come in when I call," said he, and Dipps, with a long glance at the package, withdrew.

In the hall he sat down on the lowest step of the elegantly carpeted stairs and waited.

For a moment the eyes of the three men were riveted upon the package, and then the hand of Major Trumps lifted it.

"I can guess what it contains," he said, in a husky voice. "This man is still the bane of my life, and if he is not silenced, the game is up."

"Silence him," said Doctor Baker. "There is to be nothing left between us and success, you know."

"Open the package," put in Whitebeard. "He has been very careful, for he has wrapped it with gold thread, and the knots are many and well placed."

Major Trumps said nothing, but his face, pallid and drawn, told of fear and mental anguish.

He took up the knife again and ran the keen blade beneath some of the threads, cutting them by the slightest movement.

The broken ends fell apart and the package slipped open.

Slowly the hands of the major undid it, and a cry rose from the doctor's lips.

"A hoax!" he cried. "One of Goldstein's jokes, whoever he is. The thing contains nothing."

But Major Trumps did not look up, only bent again to his task, carefully unwrapping the last folds and shaking the paper over the table cloth.

"Nothing?" said he, looking up and catching his companions' eye. "Nothing? Where are your eyes, gentlemen? There lies the gift from demon land."

Doctor Baker adjusted his monocle and bent over the table, while Whitebeard, with a half sneer on his face, looked quietly on.

"Why, it's a knife point," cried Baker.

Major Trumps had fallen back, and his gaze was fastened upon the glittering object lying in the light, triangular in shape, and quite minute.

"Why should that little thing blanch your cheeks, my dear Trumps?" exclaimed the man with the white beard.

"You don't fear it, I hope?"

"It's not half as deadly as one of the snakes," put in the demon doctor. "A fang discounts that knife point and is deadlier by an hundred per cent. than it."

"You say that with ease," responded Major Trumps. "It's only a dagger point. But it comes from a friend—a cool man, capable of destroying everything."

"Then the sender dies!"

"At once," cried Whitebeard.

"That, too, is easy to say," stammered Major Trumps.

"Reflect for a moment. Three against one, and the three are armed as men have never been armed before."

"I know that, but here is a man capable of breaking down every rampart and storming our castle."

"Pish!" exclaimed the white-bearded man, and his hand crossed the space and picked up the knife point. "Is this all he sent? No message. What's this? Ah, here's your letter, major."

He pushed the package toward Major Trumps, and all saw some letters on the inner paper.

"That's the message," said Baker.

Major Trumps grasped the paper and looked at it searchingly for a moment.

"I didn't know you had such a foe," remarked Whitebeard.

"I knew it, but I thought—I thought he was no longer within reach."

"Reckoned without your host, eh? We all do that sometimes. What does he say?"

"Read!"

Trumps pushed the paper toward his friends, and both of them leaned forward.

They read in silence.

"Here's the proof, but I have the key of life and death. You know it. You play fair with me, Major Trumps, or I strike."

"It's a threat," said Doctor Baker, looking up at the major, whose face showed his trepidation.

"You won't be blackmailed, will you, by this wretch?" asked Whitebeard.

"I won't, yet—yet, what can I do?"

Major Trumps' hand fell lifeless like upon the table, and his eyes seemed to grow listless.

"You're a coward!" exclaimed Doctor Baker. "On the threshold of success are you going to let an old enemy step in and dash to earth the house of fortune? Is this to be the end of our little game? Will you make peace with this fool—for fool he is to disclose his plans by such a message? Is this the play you want him to make and then refuse to strike him back?"

"No! I would strike him back, but he is so terrible an enemy that I shrink."

"Where is he. Call in your servant."

The major turned toward the door, but he did not call for Dipps, for Doctor Baker spoke again.

"Wait! Dipps knows where this man hides. He says he occupies the same nest with him."

"He does."

"We can strike to-night."

"The sooner the better," said Whitebeard.

"Yes, the sooner we deal with the major's enemy, the sooner we are free from such a foe. The other man can wait—wait for his doom," and the speaker grinned, looking across the chamber.

Doctor Baker slipped from the room, and a few minutes later returned with a little package in his hand.

He finished tying it at the table, and laid it underneath the lamp as he did so.

"Now, call in Dipps," said he.

Major Trumps did so, and Dipps came back.

"What did he say about the answer," asked the major.

"He said there was to be none."

"I should think not."

"How did he look?" asked Whitebeard.

"He seemed to mean all that may have been in that package."

"A good answer. Then he must be a demon, major."

"He is."

"Now, Dipps, you will go back," said Doctor Baker, laying his hand on the package he had fetched into the room.

"You are ready, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You serve my friend, the major, don't you, Dipps?"

"That's my duty."

"Then put this little package in your pocket, Dipps. Don't lose it. The major sanctions everything I say."

Major Trumps nodded and smiled.

"You will go home at once. You

package. You will tell him that Major Trumps will probably accede to his demands. You need not mention that you found him otherwise than alone."

The listening Dipps bowed.

"Here's the package, Dipps. Be careful that you are neither robbed nor that you lose the message."

"Who is it for?" ventured Dipps.

"After you have reported to Goldstein you will wait till his room is silent—in other words, till you are quite sure he is asleep. Then you will slip this little package underneath his door, or, failing in that, you will drop it over the transom. But you are to slip it into his room."

"That's my command, Dipps," said Major Trumps.

Dipps, with the mysterious package, was let out of the house, and he started off.

Suddenly he let out a sharp cry.

"Merciful heavens! there's a snake in the package!" he exclaimed, and every vestige of color fled from his face.

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIL IN THE DUST.

Early the next day Genteel Joe might have been seen seated in the parlor of the Daniels mansion.

The detective was alone, waiting for Miss Lotty, the daughter of the millionaire.

In a little while the door opened to admit the fair girl, dressed in the deepest mourning, and the moment she saw the detective she started forward and stopped before him.

"You got my message, did you?" she exclaimed. "I was afraid perhaps you would not be in when Savage called, but, thank Heaven, you were found."

She had shut the door behind her, and her face indicated great excitement and breathless interest in something as yet undisclosed.

"Perhaps I should not have done it, but you know the circumstances, and I could not break the force of my curiosity. Besides this, something told me that my welfare was concealed in the package we found in the desk, and it is. It contained his last will. It is a startling document."

Her face was quite white, and the eyes seemed to have a wild look while she spoke.

Joe Nichols watched her closely and noticed that she seemed on the point of falling to the floor, but when she dropped into a chair her courage appeared to come back.

"I read the will. It is in his familiar hand, but the import of it is what drove all color from my face and sent me in a lengthy swoon to the floor, where Savage found me."

"But it makes you his sole heir, doesn't it?"

"Yes; that is not the fearful point. I care not for wealth, for I have seen so much of the abuse of it. It makes me the wife of a certain man."

"What! Is that in the will?"

"Yes, it gives me away, leaving me no choice in the matter, and I have made up my mind to obey."

"In other words, you are ready to wreck your happiness at the demand of your father?"

"You may call it so. It will be a union against which the better part of me will revolt, but I intend to obey!"

The ferret did not speak.

She stood before him, white-faced, and with her hands clinched, her lips bloodless, and her figure swaying, for she had left the chair.

"It gives me away to Major Trumps."

"To that man? There must be a mistake about all this."

"Would to Heaven it was a dream, a nightmare or a farce. It is only too true. The will is genuine; it was witnessed by Doctor Baker and another gentleman, who sometimes called upon father. It is in his own hand, and there can be no mistake."

"But you don't know this man."

"I never saw him till yesterday."

"And your father? What could have induced him to sacrifice his child's happiness in this manner?"

"An old debt. He owed his life in a measure to Major Trumps. The will but partially tells the story. It was an incident in his foreign travels. He traveled, you know, on the continent and all over the world."

Joe thought of the story spun for him by Major Trumps in the latter's house, but he did not mention it.

"Some-how-or-other, that man saved my father's life, and in order to repay him he gives me to him by will."

"We must break this will, then!"

"No, it is the hand of the dead. It is my father's last work. I worshipped him, you know."

"But this terrible union, Miss Lotty—"

"Let that pass. The will gives the property to me on no conditions. I could not surrender it and escape this marriage. I am willed to this Major Trumps, who may be a demon, doubly-dyed, but a gentleman outwardly."

"There may have been undue influences."

"I think not. Father was always a man of strange ideas and impulses. He was the very pink of honor, and would not do anything that he thought I would refuse to sanction after his death."

"But this is too much."

"I submit, but you shall see the will."

Lotty withdrew a moment, and came back with the document in her hands.

"It is not a lengthy document. You can get through it in a few minutes. I should not have opened it, but, as I have said, something seemed to tell me that my fate was linked within its heart, and I fell."

Joe read the will through.

The terrible bequest to Major Trumps was there!

"It gives you no alternative," said he, looking into the face of the silent girl.

"That is true. I must become the wife of this man with the repellant face and keen eyes—Doctor Baker's friend."

The detective handed the paper back and thought a moment.

"He mentions an affair in Paris, and the intervention of his friend, Major Trumps, in a cafe."

"Yes; father must have been in peril of his life then."

"Or the major may have magnified the danger."

"We cannot help it if he did so. I shall carry out the provision of this will even though my action wrecks my whole future, as I fear it will do."

Genteel Joe let his eye wander over the will again.

"It stipulates that you shall become his wife within three days after he presents himself formally with the knowledge of the bequest before him."

"He may come to-day."

"He will not come till after the will has been read."

Lottie Daniels seemed to take hope.

"We could stave off the evil day some time, miss. There need be no haste in the probation of your father's last will, or the document may not be found for some time."

"But it has been found. Savage knows of it, and so does Doctor Baker."

"Ah!" exclaimed Joe, "the doctor knows, does he?"

"Yes; he was here last night."

"And saw the will?"

"I am sure he did, for when Sam carried me to my room, after my terrible discovery, he found me, and seemed to tell me by his look that he knew all."

"It is too late, then; Doctor Baker, one of the witnesses to the will, knows all."

"It must be so."

Lotty Daniels carried the will away, and the man-trailer was again alone in the parlor.

"Did Duke Daniels write that document?" ran through his mind.

"Is that a genuine paper, or is it the

work of the plotters? The affair in the cafe is hinted at in the will—the same one Major Trumps spun for me, and which is called a hoax by Dipps. There is a deep plot for booty and beauty here, and if I fail to ferret out the guilty, may the city no longer hear of Joe Nichols, ferret."

By this time the footsteps of Lotty sounded again in the hall, and she came back.

Her face looked calmer now, and she breathed freer.

There was even a little smile at the corners of her mouth.

"I have fully determined to obey the will," she said. "No matter what misery it brings me, it is to be carried out to the letter, and I will become the wife of Major Trumps, whoever he be."

Joe looked at her, and from the depths of his heart pitied the beautiful victim.

A few minutes later he stood alone in the library, the scene of the tragedy, and crossed it to the secret door behind the bookcase.

The button in the wall was pressed, and Joe Nichols stepped into the little apartment, where he had found the pierced paper embellished with the coffin, and the dagger in the table.

The detective shut the door carefully behind him and slid the brass bolt.

He had not examined the place on his previous visit, and now he would do so.

It was a room without a window, a secret place the existence of which was known to but few persons.

He leaned over the table and found papers there which told that at times Duke Daniels had come to the chamber and remained some time writing.

But the detective after a long search found what he looked for—an exit—not the one which led into the library.

A door was deftly set in the wall nearly opposite the secret entrance.

He found that he could open this door by means of a little screw almost hidden in the wall, and when he had turned the steel the portal moved enough to let him out.

Genteel Joe stepped into a narrow place barely wide enough to admit him, and there he stood for half a second noting his surroundings.

A flight of steps was before him, and he descended.

At the seventh one he was stopped by a door, which he opened, and entered a dark underground corridor, which, in turn, moving upward, gradually led him to a door which led to the open air in the rear of the house.

The detective stood there drinking in the sights before him a moment when he went back.

The secret trail of the assassin was quite plain to him now.

He could conceive how the murderer could have stolen upon his victim in the library and committed the deed.

But who had pointed out the way to this murderer?

Was there a traitor in the millionaire's mansion?

Was Savage playing a double game? Or the maid?

Joe went back over the ground, looking along the dark little corridor with a match in his hand.

He reached the secret chamber and stopped there.

His feet had disturbed the dust, and in some places covered himself with it.

But once had he been more than momentarily attracted by any one thing on the trail, and that was a footprint in the dust near the last door.

He bent over the mark with his matches.

It was the mark of a boot, and the heel had left its traces in the dust.

Joe Nichols recalled the mark of the boot heel in the corner of the corridor where Splinters had seen a man crouched, tiger-like, in his house.

There was a cross formed of nails in that heel, and they had been printed in the dust of the two corridors.

Joe felt that he had made a startling discovery, but he did not show it to Lotty when he emerged from the library a few moments later.

It was his find and his secret.

He met the girl with a calm unruffled countenance, held her outstretched hand a few seconds, and looked into her eyes, which told of the terrible struggle forced upon her by the will.

"I am going to try to save you," said Joe.

"You cannot. There is nothing to do but to obey the dead."

"We shall see."

"Don't do anything but your duty. Find the hand that struck him down. That is all I ask."

"I am going to do that and more, too, miss."

"More, too, Mr. Nichols?"

"Yes, but wait—wait," and he turned away without giving her a chance to push her query.

In the sunlight of that morning, Joe, the ferret, stood on the sidewalk and looked back at the mansion.

He saw the curtains come together in one of the windows and a face vanished.

"I have found the trail of the slayer," said he. "I have seen the print of his foot, but his hand—never mind. I'll find that, too!"

At the same hour, in another part of the city, a little man, connected with our story, was gazing horror-struck upon a placard on a certain door.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EDGE OF THE TERRIBLE TRUTH.

Armed with the living package, Dipps flitted from street to street, with fear at his heart.

His terrible discovery that the package contained life seemed to age him ten years in a minute, and he wanted to get rid of the thing as soon as possible.

Why had he ever become Major Trumps' slave?

Why had he linked his fortunes to those of that cool-headed and merciless scamp?

Poor Dipps! He was in the toils, and his scarred and helpless hand told him that he would carry to his grave the proofs of his own unmanliness.

He stopped once and felt for the package in his bosom.

What if the deadly contents of that package should escape?

He shivered at the thought, but he dared not draw it forth and cast it hence.

At last he reached the tenement and slipped up to his nest.

He cast a side-long glance toward Goldstein's apartment, but went first to his own den.

He laid the package in one corner, and then put off for the other room.

Goldstein admitted him.

"Did you find him?" queried Goldstein.

"Yes."

"And delivered the package?"

"He got it."

"You're a trump, Dipps. You ought to have a medal for your promptness."

"No, thanks. It's all over now, and I wish you good-night."

But Goldstein insisted that he remain awhile, and he did so, not wishing to go back to the companion he had left in his own chamber, wrapped up, 'tis true, but deadly all the same.

It was late when Dipps went back to his nest.

He listened at the door, and thought he heard Goldstein preparing to retire.

He was eager to get rid of the package.

Not for the world would he have kept it all night in his room.

There was death under the wrapper, and he knew it.

"Dash it all! Was I born to serve a devil like Doctor Baker, and a demon like Major Trumps?" he exclaimed. "I wonder who the other was—another rascal of the first water, no doubt. What

would Joe, the ferret, say if he knew what has taken place to-night? It would be nuts for Nichols, but my lips are sealed. I have told him all I dare let out. It is death to tell more."

Once more Dipps listened at the door, his ear being remarkably acute, but he heard nothing.

All was silence in Goldstein's room.

By and by Dipps slipped into the hall and investigated.

The light had been turned out, and the time for action had come.

With a devilish leer in his eyes, Dipps charily drew the package from where he had placed it, and went to the door.

It was not thicker than his hand, and he could slip it underneath the victim's door.

Dipps crept forward in his bare feet and accomplished his purpose.

He thrust the package as far beneath the door as possible, and took a long breath when he rose.

It was done!

Whatever was in that little package, Goldstein would find out, but only when it was too late.

And what would he get for his wild villainy? Nothing.

Major Trumps would have a fresh hold on him, and he would be still the slave of the scoundrel and the ally of Doctor Baker and his white-bearded friend.

Dipps crept shudderingly to bed that night, but not until he had thrown a lot of rags against the foot of his door and pressed them into the crevice with his feet.

If the death dealer in the package should escape from Goldstein's room it should not come back to him.

Dipps fell into a deep slumber, and did not awake till daylight flooded his shabby room.

"I wonder if it got out?" was his ejaculation as he sprang from his couch and bounded to the door.

He listened, but heard nothing.

Dipps leaned into the hall and craned his neck to get a view of Goldstein's door.

"What's that?" welled from his throat as he leaped forward. "A bit of paper on Goldy's door? As I live, it is nothing else."

He landed in front of the portal, forgetting all about the package he had carried to the spot, and the next moment he was staring at a square piece of pasteboard upon which some hand had scrawled in large, ungainly letters:

"Out of Town."

No wonder Dipps stared at the legend on the paper, for he had heard Goldstein's deep breathings the night before.

Had the intended victim of the cabal escaped?

The man with the withered hand did not know just what to do next.

If Goldstein had gone out in the dark before discovering the package, then it was his duty to find the serpent, and either kill it in its wrappings or return it to Doctor Baker, with a story made up for the occasion.

Dipps went back to his own room and put on his boots.

Once more he glided back to Goldstein's apartment and opened the door.

A glance told him all.

The man with the branded bosom was gone.

In vain did Dipps look about for the snake.

The package lay on the floor with a little opening, which told that the seal which would last so many hours, had parted of its own accord and let the destroyer out.

But what has become of the labarri?

Dipps in his distress shut the door and began a courageous hunt for the deadly reptile.

He ransacked the place with eager eyes and nimble fingers. He let nothing that might be a hiding place for the smallest of the serpent tribe to escape him.

"It's gone!" cried Dipps. "Perhaps

it will bite some one else—in the tall beehive. What if I am suspected?"

At last Dipps shut the door and went out.

He leaned against the wall, and felt the blood desert his heart as he confronted the situation.

"Well, I'm not responsible, anyhow," he said to himself. "I'll leave the place. They shan't find Dipps and drag him before the courts to make him tell the story of the deadly reptile. A thousand curses on your head, Doctor Baker, and on yours, too, Major Trumps. If I find Genteel Joe I'll tell him the whole story. No, no. I dare not do that. I am too deep in the shadows myself. I'll just keep my secret and let him unravel the mystery."

Dipps put out from the old house and went down on the street.

There seemed to be an avenging shadow at his heels, and he felt the terror of his last situation chilling his heart.

Dipps turned into the Battery and sat down.

All at once some one dropped down upon the bench beside him.

Dipps started and looked round to find himself face to face with one whom he did not recognize at first.

"You're an early bird, Dipps," said a voice, and the following moment he fell back and nearly off the bench, for it was Goldstein's tone.

"How's the reptile, eh, Dipps?" continued the man with the branded breast.

Dipps could not reply; his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"It's all right. Don't blame you one particle. It was a clever job—just the sort I half looked for."

"Did you find it?" stammered Dipps.

"Find it? why, of course. That was your intention, wasn't it?"

"I didn't want to do it, Goldy, but if you could know how I—"

"I know. You are in the coils and the toils. You can't escape. You are Major Trumps' slave, and he is the Demon Doctor's friend. But, Dipps, I have another message for my old friend, the major."

"Don't send me back there," he pleaded.

"Back you go, but not with a direct message from me. Tell him this—that you placed the little man-killer rightly, that you looked into my room this morning and found me lying stiff on the bed."

"But—"

"Never mind the truth, Dipps. That's the message you are to carry to Major Trumps. You carry it or I'll show you a trick to which the carrying of a serpent in a sealed package is not to be compared. Will you go?"

Dipps laid his hand on Goldstein's arm.

"Tell me, Goldstein, what became of the snake."

"What, did you look for it this morning?"

"I did."

"And failed to find it, of course?"

"I beg pardon, but I ransacked your room, and without the least success."

"It wasn't there, Dipps."

"Did it get away to kill some little human dove in the tenement?"

"Some little human dove? How kind and considerate you are, to be sure. After carrying a deadly snake to my door you manifest some compassion for a child. Why, Dipps, your gall is monumental. The snake wasn't in the room when you looked for it."

"You killed it, then, thank heaven!"

"Never mind. Now to the business of the hour. Go to Major Trumps with the message I have indicated. You looked into my room and found me dead this morning."

"But he may investigate."

"That man? He'll take your word for it, Dipps."

The man with the withered hand rose and looked down at the disguised Goldstein.

"Be off with you, Dipps. I will know if you tell the truth or not."

But once did Dipps look back at the

little bench in the park, but already it was empty.

He flitted away with his heart in his throat, and when, an hour later, he crept back to his room in the Tall Beehive, he found it occupied by a man, at sight of whom he fell back to the door.

"Good morning, Dipps," said the visitor. "I thought I would drop in a moment."

Dipps went over to the bed and sat down.

Here was his opportunity, for his caller was Genteel Joe.

He could tell everything now, and clear his conscience, but he did not.

"Anything more to tell?" asked Joe. "You haven't written any more mis-sives with the left hand, Dipps?"

"I have nothing more to add, Joe. Only be careful and keep your eyes open."

"The major is dangerous, is he, Dolliver?"

"Dangerous? He's more than that; he's deadly."

"And very cunning. When he marries I suppose you will be installed in his palatial mansion as general secretary and messenger."

"When the major marries, Joe? That's about the last thing he will do."

"Don't be too positive. He's not an old man yet, and beauty can enslave him, despite his distrust of womankind."

"Why, there's his wife—there's Florence—"

Dipps caught himself, but a trifle too late.

"Oh, yes, there's Florence," said the cunning detective. "I know that, but Florence won't stand in the way when the major wants to marry Lotty Daniels."

"Lotty Daniels?" cried Dipps, starting up, his eyes ablaze. "He don't think of doing that, does he? Why, Joe, she's too good and pure for a wretch like Major Trumps. You must stop that match. It must not take place. I'll betray him first; I'll tell all I know."

"It's that or the marriage, Dipps. Now go on."

But Dipps sat silent on the edge of the bed, and his lips were welded, while the detective waited for the confession that did not come.

CHAPTER XIII.

SPLINTERS FINDS AN ALLY.

Dipps looked like a guilty person as he sat on the bed with the gaze of Genteel Joe riveted upon him.

"Why don't you go on, Dipps?"

The man started, but did not reply.

"You know something; you can show me the trail. You should do so, Dipps, or Major Trumps will become the husband of Miss Lotty."

"He must not, I say!"

"It lies with you. You know that. You have been this man's slave, most likely willingly."

"No, no."

"Very well, go on, then."

Dipps crossed the room and stopped at the wall with one hand resting on the papering there.

"I dare not tell you. I am oath bound."

"Yet you don't want the girl to sacrifice herself to this cool scoundrel—your master—Dipps."

"That is true. Good-by, Joe. In the future may we meet under more pleasant circumstances."

Dipps was out in the hall almost before his last words were spoken.

Genteel Joe heard him on the stairs, and the following moment he lost the sound of his flying feet.

The ferret did not remain long, for there was nothing in the room to keep him back, and in a little while he had followed Dipps to the street.

It was no use looking for the fleeing man, and Joe did not lose any time in this way.

On the edge of a confession which might have unraveled a mystery, Joe had lost the clew by Dipps' flight.

As for Dipps, he recalled his orders from Goldstein—to seek out Major

Trumps and make a false report of the work of the serpent.

He was between two fires; he feared both Goldstein and Major Trumps, and for a moment he did not know which master to cling to.

At this juncture a hand fell upon his arm, and he looked into the striking face of Splinters.

Dipps knew the little man more than by sight, and Splinters smiled as he gazed into the startled face of the withered hand.

"What is it?" asked Dipps.

"I'll tell you if you'll come with me."

Dipps followed passively, and in a short time they were seated in a small room to which Splinters had led him.

For a moment the face of Dipps took courage by the kindly look in his companion's eyes, and then it as suddenly paled again.

"You still serve the major, eh, Dipps?" asked Splinters.

"I am still in his employ."

"I thought so. You can't get away. You are bound to your task master as with bonds of iron. He's a good one, Dipps."

"You know him as well as I do. You know Major Trumps and the doctor. Do you know the other?"

"Which other?"

"The fine-looking man with the white beard."

"Is he with them again?"

"Yes."

"Where was he?"

"At Doctor Baker's house."

"When?"

"Last night."

"What were they talking about?"

"That's private."

"Private, Dipps? Don't you know, man, that I have a right to know some things?"

"Perhaps you have, but this matter is too private for me to talk about."

Splinters left his seat and bent over the silent Dipps.

"Look here, man. You've got one bitten hand, and you're liable to get another. I understand the whole situation. You serve Major Trumps and the others, and you don't want to cross them by betraying them. Isn't that it?"

"I dare not tell you, Splinters."

"Then go out and let the police get sight of you. Go out there, if you can afford it, and let some of the ferrets of New York become your shadow, tracking you day and night, and not giving you a moment's peace of mind, sleeping or waking. How does that suit you, Dipps? How do you like the outlook?"

"You don't intend to hand me over to espionage just because I refuse to betray them?"

"I do. I am a man without mercy. I was born under a merciless star, and I have no warm blood in my veins."

"Why do you want to know all this?"

"That's for me to know."

"You are allied with the ferret—with Genteel Joe."

"Allied with Joe, the ferret; for what, Dipps?"

"You know what his mission is—to find the murderer of Duke Daniels."

"That is his mission now, and if this mystery is ever unraveled it will be by Genteel Joe."

"Yes, by the ferret of Broadway."

"Then, Dipps, don't you realize that it puts you in a very uncomfortable position?"

"How?"

"By your silence. You are Major Trumps' slave. The major is a cool, sleek rascal of the first water. He is hand in glove with Doctor Baker and the white-bearded gentleman who seems to have projected himself into the drama."

"I think from words I overheard last night he must just have come across the sea."

"Why didn't you say so before? That's a bit of news about Whitebeard. A late passenger? Are you sure you never saw him before, Dipps?"

"Quite sure."

"He didn't recognize you, eh?"

"He did not."

A smile chased the serious look from the face of Splinters.

"Let's make a bargain—let's form an alliance, Dipps."

"I hardly understand you."

"I'll make it a little plainer. It's this way: We're not millionaires. We can't draw our check for a dollar and have it honored at any bank in the city."

"I should say we can't."

"You don't know how nice it is to be able to get all the money you want by merely putting your name to a bit of paper."

"I never had the experience."

"It's delightful. It's one of the exquisite pleasures of life."

"I don't doubt it, if the money's there for you."

"Oh, in the first place you must know that it is there."

"That's it—get it first, eh?"

"Just so; and I have a plan by which we can get it."

Dipps took hope, and his countenance brightened.

"It will require a little stretching of our consciences," pursued Splinters, dropping into the confidential. "But you and I, Dipps, needn't care for that. It's an every-day affair now, and we musn't be behind our neighbors."

"Go on. Tell me the plan."

"There's money in this mystery."

"In the Avenue mystery?" cried Dipps.

"That's it. You see, Dipps, the police are in the dark, while you and I are in a position to make a good bargain."

"Not with the police?"

"Not at present—with the murderer."

Dipps seemed to lose his breath, and fell back in his chair and stared aghast at his companion.

"That would be dangerous, wouldn't it?"

"We could avoid the danger. We could play a hand worthy of the old masters, and could feather our nests in a manner lovely to behold."

"I would want a sure thing."

"We'll have it thus before we strike."

"In the first place, if we made a mistake in regard to our man—if we attempted to blackmail the wrong man, why—"

"We won't do that," broke in Splinters, confidentially. "I will agree to find the hand that killed Duke Daniels, and then we'll play our cards."

"What if he refuses to be bled?"

"He won't—he can't. We'll pull the ropes on him in the most approved style. Is it a bargain, Dipps?"

"I don't know what to say."

"But, man, you can't afford to do anything else."

"I can't?"

"I say you can't, and you shall go into the game with me now that I've gone as far as I have."

"But you might make a mistake in taking Dolliver Dipps for a fool."

"I do not. I know what I'm doing. See here. You will assist me, for two heads are better than one. You will help me through this affair. I didn't like Duke Daniels, and I have cause for not caring who killed him, but the chance to feather your nest and mine is too tempting to be overlooked."

"If I was only sure we could make the stakes—if I could only be assured that we would not fail—"

"Heavens, man! I'll assure you. I tell you I know something about this matter."

"You?"

"Yes. Splinters is no fool."

"But you are often seen with Joe, the detective. What security have I that you are not playing a hidden hand?"

"My word! my oath! But, Dipps—Dolliver of the withered hand—there is to be no backing out of this."

"You're not my master."

"I don't pretend to be. I don't pay you a salary like Major Trumps. I

haven't the bank account that gentleman rejoices in. I am no nabob, no millionaire. I am simply Splinters, the little cool head. I am seen often with Genteel Joe, but he needn't know our secrets. I am his friend. He saved my life, as he once saved yours, Dipps; but that musn't stand between us and a fortune."

"That's true. One must look to one's self first."

"That's wisdom. Now, then."

Splinters hitched his chair a little closer to the expectant Dipps, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You will begin this very day. You will open the ball in one quarter of the city and I will operate in another. You understand?"

"Not exactly."

"You will go out and tackle the situation. You will find out where this white-bearded gentleman lives and report to me. After that we play card number one."

Dipps rose and breathed free for the first time in thirty minutes.

Splinters looked up with triumph in his eyes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TEN O'CLOCK APPOINTMENT.

Genteel Joe, after his futile interview with Dipps, went back to his quarters near Broadway.

In the corner of the hall where he had seen the marks of the boot heel he stooped and examined them once more.

The cross of nails, as he had seen it before, was there, and resembled the marks seen in the dust of the secret corridor in Duke Daniels' mansion.

Some time later the ferret of New York stood under an arched roof some distance from his quarters and his face had a puzzled look.

He was back in the old corridor, near the library in the millionaire's mansion.

He stood alone in the place with the light of the bull's-eye lantern falling upon the dust, which he had not disturbed, and he was bending over the floor.

Once more his eyes were fastened on the nailmarks in the dust, and, with deft fingers and a bit of tape line, he measured the print of the heel.

Sam Savage, the coachman, was the only person connected with the house who knew of his presence, for he had entered the place via the stables, where he had found the cunning Jehu.

Joe at last turned back toward the library and reached the little chamber just behind it, when he heard voices in the room beyond.

He slipped over to the door and, after a moment's listening there, flitted back into the corridor.

He was just in time, for he heard the secret door across the room swing open, and some one came in.

The keen eyes of the hidden detective found the merest streak of light, which enabled him to look into the hidden room, and he glued his peepers to it.

In another moment he saw Doctor Baker step into the room and calmly advance to the table with steady step. Joe watched him as he leaned over, and seemed to regard with a half smile the indenture made by the dagger which had been found sticking in the wood.

After awhile Jared Baker drew from his pocket a little case, which he proceeded to open.

He took from the case a phial containing a reddish liquid, which he admired as he held it between him and the artificial light, and then he found in the same case a syringe, with which he proceeded to inject some of the fluid into his arm.

All this was witnessed by the secreted ferret, who did not let a single movement of the doctor's escape him.

Doctor Baker restored the case and its contents to his pocket, and began to write on a sheet of paper which he took from the table drawer.

The writing he folded and laid in the

drawer, which he locked, and wiped the pen.

Having done this, he looked carefully around the apartment and pushed back his chair.

Joe saw him quit the room, and waited till the door had been shut before he moved.

No sooner had the portal of the library leading into the main hall been closed than he turned to the table and tried the little drawer.

Of course the doctor's key had secured it, but the detective was not to be balked thus.

From among a bunch of curious keys he selected one which opened the drawer, and in another minute he held in his hand the message the doctor had deposited there.

It was brief, and the ferret mastered it in a glance.

With a singular smile at his lips, Joe replaced the paper and looked up.

"We'll see about that, doctor," was all he said, and then he sat down and waited.

Hearing the front door open and shut, he slipped back into the narrow corridor and sprang down it like a ghost.

He came out in another part of the house, from which it was but a step to the stables, where he found Savage waiting for him in the cosy coachman's room.

"Did you see the doctor?" queried Sam.

"I saw him."

"Was he talking to Miss Lotty?"

"They were in the library."

"That man is a living mystery. He is a man of mysteries and a man of power. He is cool-headed, and always ready for an emergency. His friend Major Trumps is not quite so cool. Why, he's but the doctor's tool and emissary."

"You don't rate the major very high, Savage."

"I give the devil his due, but that's a fact. Major Trumps is somehow under the demon doctor's thumb, and he can't call his soul his own."

"Then you don't think that the major could have left the knife in the table and driven it through the coffin-marked paper which was found in the secret room?"

"I don't say he wouldn't commit a crime as dastardly as that one, but he never killed Duke Daniels."

"That would please the major, no doubt. He would be under obligations to you if he could only hear your exoneration of him."

"I don't want his obligations, curse him! If I ever run across him I'm liable to throttle him, night or day."

"I'm coming back here to-night. You will keep guard while I am in the house. We're likely to have a visitor."

"Who will it be?"

"The night will determine that. The secret room will be visited."

"By one of the plotters?"

"I can't say."

"I see. You know just enough, and no more."

"I know that if no plans fail, some one will be in the secret room this very night."

"At what hour?"

"At ten."

"That person can't get there without my knowledge."

"I know that, but you will let him get there."

"I understand. You want to catch him in the room."

"Perhaps. I will come to the house to-night. It will be quiet after the funeral, and Miss Lotty will not want to be disturbed."

"She has already given orders to that effect."

Genteel Joe bade the coachman goodbye, and once more appeared on the street.

"I am going to see the person for whom Doctor Baker left the note in the

table," said he to himself. "This may be a new link in the chain, and—"

A light footstep sounded at his side, and he glanced down into a face which was that of a boy.

"Zara would like to see you, sir," said the little fellow.

"Zara?"

"Don't you remember Zara? He told me to say to you that he was nearer than you think, and that if you'd come with me, I would show you where he lives."

Joe looked once more at the honest face of the youth, and told him to lead on.

This the boy did, gladly, and after a few steps he was led to a door which the boy opened.

"Zara's changed a good deal since you saw him, I guess," said the ferret's guide. "Here he is."

At the same moment the boy opened a door and ushered Genteel Joe into a darkened apartment.

"Here he is, Zara. I watched for him till he came out."

At the same time a voice in one corner of the room was heard, and out of the semi-gloom a figure bounded to the detective's side.

"It's Joe, sure enough, Blazer," the strange one said. "Don't you know me, Nichols?"

Joe drew the speaker toward the opened door, where the light was, and looked down into a thin face with high cheek bones and deep-set eyes of dark gray.

"I do. You are Zara of—"

"There! that'll do, Joe. I'm Zara, the son of Mother Mangleworm, the old fence whom you hunted down years ago. But you did me a favor. You kept my secret, and never let the world know my lineage. I'm still under obligations to you for that favor, and now I want to return it."

"Which you needn't do, Zara. You've repaid me before this, but I had quite lost sight of you."

"No wonder. I only came back the other day. I've been across the pond."

"You have?"

"Yes. I came back to the old town but the other day. I came on the Paris. We had a passenger who is as cool a wretch as ever escaped the hangman's noose. I want to tell you about him, Joe."

"Wherefore, Zara?"

"It may let some light in upon this last crime—the crime of the avenue which stirs the city. I've heard about it, you see, and Blazer has brought me the newspapers that tell about it. This passenger of ours must have known something about it."

"The passenger of the Paris, Zara?"

"Yes. He is a distinguished personage, with a full white beard. When I say that General Capulet—that's the name he came over under—knows something about this crime—that he knew it was to be committed—I believe I am telling you the solemn truth, Joe."

The detective did not reply.

"He wrote a good deal on shipboard when he was not observed. He would write and tear up. He would scribble and burn, and despite his Frenchified manner, he is an American. I discovered that much."

"You kept your eyes open, Zara, I see."

"That's what they're for. This man, I say, wrote only to destroy, it seems. He was at it nearly all the time. But he had a spy at his heels. A little hole and a pair of keen eyes stand one in need a good deal, Joe."

"That's right, Zara—especially eyes like yours."

The boy smiled, and his look became excited.

"I made a little rogue of myself on the ship. This much writing by General Capulet excited my suspicions."

"Well?"

"And I robbed his cabin."

"That was risky, Zara."

"No risk, no fortunes."

"That is true. Well, what did you get for your pains?"

"A lot of scraps. He had scribbled on the paper and thrown the torn bits over the floor. I didn't get them all, but I made myself master of the left of them."

As Zara finished he pulled a lot of crumpled papers from his pocket and handed them to Genteel Joe.

"You'll find the name of Duke Daniels on several of the pieces. And there's a clause or two like the clauses of a will. It is all the general's work and, my word for it, he's a great rogue, if nothing less. Capulet must have known Duke Daniels, if he did not know that he was to be killed in cold blood!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE STING OF MADNESS.

A few minutes before ten o'clock that night Genteel Joe, the detective, presented himself to Sam Savage in the coachman's stable box at the Daniels' Mansion, and forthwith entered the little door which would lead him to the corridor where he had seen the marks of the boot heel.

At one part of the narrow way there was an indenture in the wall large enough to conceal a human figure, and into this space the eager ferret thrust himself.

The house was still, for it was the night after the burial of Duke Daniels, and Lotty had given orders that she was not to be disturbed.

Genteel Joe had the passage all to himself, and felt that he was to witness a meeting of some sort.

The paper found in the table drawer, the one placed there by Doctor Baker, was to be found by some one, and the ferret's curiosity was on the alert to see who would call for it.

All at once there came to his ears a sound he could not misinterpret.

It was the shutting of a door at one end of the passage, and he waited on.

Suddenly footsteps, light ones to be sure, but footfalls all the same, came toward him, and the detective hugged the walls of the niche a little more.

Something brushed past him in the darkness.

He slipped forward and glued his eyes to the crevice through which he had observed Doctor Baker.

The light of a match for a moment illuminated the room, and he saw a figure move toward the table and open the drawer.

The next instant the message was in the hands of the intruder.

The eyes of the detective opened to their fullest capacity, watched these proceedings with eagerness, for the new comer was a woman.

He had never seen her before.

Her half-hidden face bore traces of beauty, but he could not see it well enough to enable him to identify it under circumstances which made him eye it all the closer.

The match went out as the woman turned from the table with the message in her possession.

She had accomplished her purpose, for had she not got Doctor Baker's letter which bore his commands?

Genteel Joe slipped down the corridor after the woman.

He left the place of darkness and found himself under the roof of a little porch from which it was but a step into the starlight.

His quarry vanished.

The detective was nonplussed, and while he stood on the porch undecided as to what to do, his wrist was encircled by a human hand.

"Did she vanish?" asked a voice at his ear. "She is the ghost lady of the house. It's the second time I've seen her. She must have dissolved."

It was the voice of Sam, the coachman, and his lips almost touched Genteel Joe's face.

"I tracked her to this spot, Sam."

"Yes; I saw her come out of the house.

She was the person who came to the secret room?"

"The same."

"And you saw her?"

"But poorly; for she did her work in the light of a match, and it was a brief one."

"Of course. Didn't light the gas, eh? Came and went like a ghost; but ghosts don't strike matches."

"That is true. She may have re-entered the house."

The coachman was more than puzzled.

"We must find that creature!" said he, with resolution. "She is so crafty in her movements."

"When did you see her last?"

"The night of the crime."

"That night?" cried Genteel Joe.

"Yes, and she vanished right where we stand, just as she did to-night."

"It's queer."

"I never said anything about it, because I'm superstitious. I have a dread of ghosts, and this creature was so like a spirit in her movements that I felt a chill run over me whenever I thought of her."

"We'll see. These doors are locked?"

"All of them. She was on the porch right here, for she came out that door in advance of you."

They sounded the doors. All were locked; but, all at once, the ferret caught the coachman's arm.

"Come back into the house."

They opened a door which admitted them to the house proper, and slipped toward the front rooms.

"In the library!" said the ferret. "Stand at the door here."

The slight noise heard in the room of the murder had caught the alert detective's ear, and he had spoken hastily to his companion.

Savage planted himself at the door, as with a sudden twist of the knob, Genteel Joe opened it.

"Gone!" cried Savage.

The ferret stopped on the threshold.

He threw a hasty look at the coachman.

"Back to the porch, quick! If any one comes out of the secret door there, hold him."

Savage, with a nod, bounded down the hall, and the detective sprang across the library carpet and pressed the button in the wall.

But for once the book-case did not swing outward, and he seized it, but could not move it an inch.

Baffled by some unseen agency, Joe Nichols threw all his strength into the trial, only to be baffled as before.

No one was in the library but himself.

The person he had expected to surprise there had vanished like a spirit, and was not to be seen.

The drop light over the millionaire's desk showed him the room and its furnishings, but that was all.

Genteel Joe had to smile in spite of himself.

The situation was startling, and not altogether without a phase of humor, but he could not fathom it.

At once he heard a sharp and sudden cry from overhead, and a bound took him into the hall.

In another instant he was midway up the stairs leading to the second story when again that appalling scream—it was a scream now—filled his ears.

"Did you hear that?" cried the coachman, as his burly figure appeared at the foot of the steps. "It came from Miss Lotty's room."

It did not need this to send the detective like an arrow up the flight and land him on the floor above.

Savage was at his heels, and the two men rushed down the upper hall, the coachman pointing toward a door, over the transom of which was a light.

"There! that is her room. My God! what if it's another tragedy?"

Already Genteel Joe's hand was on the knob, but it would not turn.

"Burst it in!" shouted Sam.

The next minute Genteel Joe launched himself against the portal, and it fell in.

The two men paused on the threshold, and stared at the sight that met their gaze.

They beheld Lotty Daniels lying in an arm chair, with a deathly pallor on her face, and her eyes staring at the floor some feet away.

She neither spoke nor seemed to notice them, and the two men gazed spellbound at the sight.

"She's dead!" cried Sam. "It's another tragedy."

Genteel Joe did not speak, but sprang to the girl's side and raised one of her hands.

"There's life here yet," said he.

"It's true. There's a spark of life left."

He seized a pitcher of water on the dresser and moistened Lotty's face, and in a few moments the eyes opened and a natural look came to them.

"What was it? Who was here?" asked Sam, excitedly.

Again the gaze of the girl wandered across the carpet at her feet and seemed to rest on a certain spot at the foot of a walnut dresser.

She could not speak.

"Who frightened you, miss—the woman?" queried the detective.

One hand slowly lifted and remained in a certain position while the finger seemed to cover the dresser.

"It is there," cried the coachman. "It may have been one of the demon doctor's snakes."

The girl's gaze settled upon Savage's face for a moment, and she nodded slightly.

"It was the serpent—the little death agent, let loose in the house by that cool villain!" exclaimed Sam, catching up a poker and springing toward the stand.

"It—came from under—the—dresser," she said in husky tones. "It—was—a snake—one of his—It was yellow—"

"The color of the one I killed in the library!" cried Sam. "It is its mate."

"It must be found, for it is death!" said the detective.

"We will find it," returned Sam, but the search was without avail.

"It may have gone underneath the door and down stairs!" suddenly cried the coachman, and he bolted out, leaving Genteel Joe and the white-faced girl in the little room.

In another moment there came from below a cry that rang through the entire house, and the detective was instantly in the hallway.

He bounded down the stairs two steps at a time, and in the light of the jet on the first floor he saw a man tossing like mad against the wall and trying to tear from about his wrist something that glittered like a bracelet of polished gold.

It did not take Joe a second to reach the struggling and tortured coachman.

Sam Savage stood in the light with the whitest of faces and his wrist still encircled by a living bracelet, which seemed to have fastened itself there in the twinkling of an eye.

He was beyond the power of speech.

Genteel Joe caught at the writhing reptile, and it slipped, eel-like, through his fingers.

Suddenly, with a desperate effort, the coachman pulled it away, and flinging it to the floor, he planted his broad heel upon the wriggling mass, crushing it into pulp.

With a half-suppressed cry he looked at Joe and dashed into the library.

The detective saw him throw himself into the dead man's chair and catch up a pen.

CHAPTER XVI.

GENTEEL JOE'S TRAIL AFTER DARK.

In all his life Genteel Joe had never seen a face like the one under the drop light.

Sam Savage was surely in the throes of death, for his hand clutched the penholder as if it would crush it, while he

tried to collect his thoughts to put upon paper the story of his doom.

The pen snapped at the end of a sentence, and the coachman fell back with a strange cry.

The horrified detective bent over the scrawl on the sheet and read:

"She threw the snake at me—it curled round my wrist—she—looked like a demon and—like Doctor Baker. You—must—avenge me—too."

Genteel Joe stole a look at Sam Savage in the chair.

The eyes were already fixed in the stare of death.

And where the snake had been a living bracelet, there was a livid ring, that grew darker as the ferret watched it.

Genteel Joe caught up the paper with the dead man's scrawl thereon, and secreted it in his bosom.

So the woman had not left the house if Savage's story was true.

Once more the detective sprang to the bookcase, which opened into the secret room, but it was as solid as before, and would not move for him.

In another moment he rushed from the library, and saw on the stair the white, speechless face of Lotty Daniels.

"Savage?" she cried.

"Savage is dead down there!" said the ferret. "The reptile is dead, as well. He crushed it before he gave up his life."

"Is there another?"

"There must be. I have seen two since Savage killed the first one in the library."

She clutched the detective's wrist and led him away.

"Try the secret room," whispered she.

"I can't open it; the bookcase refuses to move."

"Then some one has shot the bolt behind the door."

The detective thought of the secret passage, and the sliding door which opened upon the porch.

"The other door, miss. You remember there's one on the porch."

"I never knew it. But find it. We must get into the room behind the library."

Genteel Joe darted away and opened the door, which he found without difficulty.

He did not look back, but knew from certain sounds that the millionaire's heiress was close behind him.

He flashed the bull's eye of his lantern as he led the way down the narrow corridor, and in a jiffy both entered the room of the green baize table.

"See, the door is bolted from the inside," cried Lotty, pointing at the door.

In another instant the detective was at the table and had forced the one drawer it contained.

This time there was no message to reward his hunt, and he looked again at his companion, whose gaze seemed to be riveted on the opposite wall.

"You cannot see it from where you stand, perhaps; but there's writing over yonder. It looks luminous and—Ah! can't you see it now?"

"I see some letters not very plain. There! they vanish."

"It is true," cried Lotty. "I was just in the act of making them out."

The ferret approached the wall, but what he had barely seen was entirely gone.

"They stood together for a moment, looking at what seemed the agency of the unreal, when a sound came from beyond the nearest wall."

"Savage has come back to life," cried Lotty Daniels.

Genteel Joe slid back the bolt that secured the secret and bounded into the library.

But everything was still and unchanged there; the body of the coachman sat in the armchair, with one of his arms resting on the edge of it and the "red bracelet" still on his wrist.

An hour later Genteel Joe was looking at a house, the front of which was rather imposing and interesting.

As he stepped back a door opened and a man came out to stop on the step an instant and light a cigar.

There was a startling coolness about this individual, who wore a white beard and was handsome.

"The passenger of the Paris," said the ferret, under his breath, as the man moved from the house and walked away.

It was easy enough to keep Whitebeard in sight, but at last he began to double like a fox, and vanished down a street not very well lighted.

The ferret of New York was not to be frustrated by such movements, and when he saw the steamship's passenger take a key from his pocket and let himself into the house before which he had stopped he smiled and knew he had tracked his quarry down.

Joe Nichols approached the premises and made a careful survey of the place.

It was not a very stylish abode for a distinguished-looking person like "General Capulet."

Genteel Joe had not seen quite enough of the man he had tracked from Doctor Baker's office at the dead hour of night; he wanted to see the general at home.

He was almost past the house when he caught the sound of voices beyond the shuttered window, and in another instant the ear of the man of trails was pressed against the slats.

"Been waiting here long for me?" said a sonorous voice.

"'Bout half an hour. I thought you would get in by and by."

"Well, I'm here. Hang it all, he won't do just what's right."

"Make him."

"I've tried to. I've argued the subject from every point. I've exerted all my arts."

"I've tried mine. He insists."

"Yes," said Whitebeard. "It's got to be done whether he says so or not. See here. There's millions at stake, and unless we can't brush this obstacle from our paths and do it at once—"

"Hush! I want to listen a minute. Some one stepped in front of the house just then. You may have been followed."

"Followed? I would like to see the person who would follow me. I didn't cross the sea for this purpose."

"That's all right. We have men right here in New York who can give your other-side detectives a mile and distance them."

"Listen, then. I forget nothing."

Genteel Joe slid from the window and dropped into a hiding place afforded by the edge of the house which stood a little out from its neighbor.

He heard the door open cautiously, and then caught sight of a shadow thrown across the narrow pave by the light inside.

Joe held his breath in his ambush and waited till the person in the doorway had made his observation.

Once more the door closed, and again the keen ear was at the window.

"It was nothing at the door, eh?" said the Whitebeard's voice.

"No, but there's nothing like being careful."

"That's right; I applaud your caution, but you can be too suspicious."

"Well, now about the game. He wouldn't listen to your line of argument to-night?"

"No. He is headstrong, but at the same time cautious. He holds the key of death and life in his hands and he knows it. He is rightly called the Demon Doctor. There's not another like him in the world. The man is poison proof."

"He must be."

"Aye, he is. I've seen him apply the antidote."

"Has he really found it, then?"

"You saw what he did for the bitten guinea pig? Well, he can save man just as well."

"How long after the bite?"

"That depends on the state of the victim's blood. Some men can be saved days after burial; others would be dead within half a minute."

"It is marvelous."

"Marvelous or not, it is true. He is the only possessor of the antidote in the world. It belongs to him, does the secret of its construction and the supply."

"Why, if he should take a notion to sweep us from his path?"

"We are powerless."

"We are not safe with that man, unless we have some of the antidote."

Whitebeard laughed dryly.

"Get it—get a jewel from the bottom of the sea!" he cried.

There was no reply, and the detective waited half a minute without hearing the silence broken.

He knew who were beyond that window—the steamer's passenger and Major Trumps.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEMON DOCTOR'S TRAP AND ITS CATCH.

The bargain between Dolliver Dipps and Splinters, though not entered into with much spirit by the former, was binding.

The man with the scarred hand was to find out where the steamer's passenger lodged, with a view of making the first play, and he reluctantly set out to perform that duty.

Dipps had misgivings.

He knew that Goldstein, the intended victim of the Demon Doctor and his friends, had escaped the fangs of the serpent, and that he was expected to tell Major Trumps that he had seen Goldstein dead in his little room.

If caught in a falsehood, would not the band turn against him, and would he not some time feel the deadly sting of the destroyer?

A short time after the departure of Splinters, Dipps might have been seen sliding through the shadows of a certain part of the city on an errand of some kind.

He had made up his mind to tell the major the truth and take the chances.

The three were more powerful than either Splinters or Goldstein.

He rang the bell of the major's residence and failed to get a response.

"Not at home? I must see him," said Dipps. "I may find him at the doctor's, but I don't like to cross that man's steps. However, I can get into the house by the rear window and wait for him."

Dipps, who knew all the entrances and exits of Major Trumps' house, effected an entrance through the rear door, and sat down in a darkened room to wait for his master.

It was not far from midnight.

For some time he was in the midst of deathly stillness, and then a key turned in the lock.

Dipps waited as footsteps approached the room where he was, and the door opened to admit some one.

The name of his master was on his lips when he heard the swish of a garment, and he hesitated.

The unseen person crossed the room to the table in the middle and paused there.

Dipps dropped behind the settee without noise and held his breath.

Presently a light flashed up and the little man saw a face half hidden by a veil, and he knew that he looked upon a woman he had seen before.

"It is Florence, the major's wife!" ejaculated Dipps.

The woman, who was clothed in deep and close-fitting black, leaned over the table and began to write.

Her work went on for some minutes, after which she rose and pushed the sheet of paper under the blotter that nearly covered the top of the table.

Then she put out the light, whisked from the room and out of the house.

"Deucedly narrow call," said Dipps, crawling from his cramped hiding place. "Florence is a half spirit, anyhow, and I don't care about falling into her clutches."

He went over to the table and pulled the paper from beneath the blotter.

His eyes seemed to dilate while he read what the woman had written.

"It's for the major exclusively, and he knows where to find it," he muttered. "What would Genteel Joe say if he could read this letter, and what would Splinters or Goldstein give for a copy of it? But I must leave it where it is, and carry the contents in my head. I'm good enough for that, I guess," and he restored the letter to its hiding place and smiled.

Ten minutes later the door opened again and the figure of Major Trumps, just back from his interview with General Capulet, came forward.

He saw Dipps the moment he turned on the light.

"Well, how goes it, Dipps, my boy?" he asked, dropping into his chair. "Been here long?"

"No."

"How did the doctor's plan work?"

"Fairly well."

"The little thing found its victim?"

"Yes."

"Now, Dipps, I have another bit of work for you."

Dipps held his breath.

"In the name of fortune, when am I to cease getting these infernal commissions?" he thought. "I would give my very life if a desert or an ocean lay between me and Major Trumps, but here I am, still his slave and tool, and—"

"It's something of this kind," broke in Major Trumps. "You know a good deal about Doctor Baker's house."

"I've been there."

"You know the way up to it by the narrow stairs. Of course you do, Dipps. You're just the man for the little scheme I have in view."

"If it's a trip back to that house where the reptiles are—"

"That's nothing; you won't be expected to take one of them from the cages. All you are expected to do is to find your way to the laboratory and bring away a certain phial."

"From among the hundreds on the shelves there?" cried Dipps, aghast.

"It's nothing—merely child's play."

"It's more like a task of Hercules, strikes me," said Dipps.

"The house can be entered without difficulty. I have a key to the doors."

"Yes."

"You can go right away, for just now Doctor Baker isn't at home, and the chances are that he won't show up till daylight. You'll have plain sailing."

Dipps said nothing.

"It's a little phial, not thicker than your finger, Dipps. It contains a reddish fluid that gets darker when you tip the phial. You will find it at the end of the third shelf from the ceiling—at the right end as you enter the laboratory. You can't miss it, Dipps."

There was no response, and Major Trumps looked over at the breathless listener and frowned.

"You heard me, Dipps?"

The little man nodded.

"Well, I'll wait for you here. It won't take you over an hour to go and come back with the phial."

Dipps rose, scarcely knowing what he did.

"Be off now. Don't forget the shelf—the third from the ceiling. Here's the night key. The laboratory is opened by pressing a button alongside the door about two feet above the floor. It's not hard to find, Dipps."

With the key in his pocket, Dipps picked up his hat and started off on the perilous mission. He reached the house of the Demon Doctor, and saw the dim light beyond the colored transom.

Dipps looked up and down the street, and at last opened the door with the latch key.

He found the stairway which led to the doctor's laboratory, and in a little while he gained the locked door, and was searching for the button.

When he found it he gave it a quick pressing, and the iron door of the doctor's secret room opened slowly.

"I'm all right," thought Dipps, "but if I get out of this safely, may I be hanged if ever I cross this threshold again!"

He knew where to find the electric light, and in a moment he had turned it on.

His eager eyes roved round the room for the article he had been sent to purloin.

The little phial was there.

Dipps sprang forward and caught it up, turning it upside down to test the fluid which grew darker as the phial was inverted, and placed it in an inner pocket.

"It's better than carrying a living snake into one's bosom," he thought. "This thing can't bite, and I believe it is a cure for the poison. If I was sure it was—"

He did not complete the sentence, but turned toward the door and passed out of the laboratory.

"I'm all right now," said Dipps.

In another minute he felt a thrill of pain in every nerve, and found himself standing in the centre of a wire mat in front of the door, his feet held down by a powerful electrical current.

The iron door had shut behind him, but still he could not step from the sensitized mat!

He knew what had happened. He had been caught in one of Doctor Baker's cunning traps!

He tried to fall against the door, but the current held him from it, and his face grew white.

What if he was to be kept there till Doctor Baker came back? and was not that to be his doom?

He gave himself up to the fate that threatened him, and submitted with the best grace he could assume.

Minutes seemed hours, but at last the change came. A door below opened and shut, and some one came up stairs.

"What?" cried Doctor Baker, with a fiendish leer. "A rat in the trap, eh? I half expected it!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH AN OLD GRUDGE HOLDS GOOD.

Genteel Joe at the blinds of the little house to which he had tracked General Capulet, slipped away when he could hear no more.

Zara had told about the general's doings on shipboard, and had furnished him with the bits of paper picked up from the floor, and these he wanted to put together in some shape.

In the solitude of his den he began this work, and the night wore away while he toiled.

Genteel Joe did not accomplish his task till near morning, for the pieces reminded him of the blocks of a crazy quilt, and more than once he was on the eve of giving up in despair.

The next day, after a nap in his den, the detective presented himself at the door of the Daniels mansion and was admitted.

Miss Lotty, calmer than when he saw her last, escorted him into the library and pointed at the empty chair at the desk.

The body of Sam, the coachman, was no longer there.

"They came and took it away," said she with a shiver. "I could not keep it in the house. The police took it off, and it is now in their hands. The red bracelet vanished with the coming of daylight. There was no mark on the wrist at all, and they seemed puzzled. I don't know what will be the result. Doctor Baker, who has just been here—"

"You sent for him then?"

"No, he came of his own accord—dropped in, he said, to see how I came on. Of course he heard of the death, and he went away, saying that he would look at the body and determine if possible what finished Savage."

"You were silent as to the events in the house last night?"

"I told him nothing."

In another moment the detective laid one hand on the girl's arm, saying:

"Would you let me see the will, Miss Lotty?"

She went out with a nod, and soon came back with the important document.

Joe Nichols carried it across the hall into the parlor and sat down.

The girl drew off a little distance and watched him eagerly. She saw him open the paper and spread it on the table before him.

Meantime Genteel Joe was examining the paper, and the millionaire's daughter saw that he had taken a queer-looking paper from his pocket and had laid it beside the will.

At last Joe handed back the will and folded the other paper.

Lotty did not speak.

"You remember what I promised to do?"

"To save me from the results of that terrible bequest?"

"Yes. I intend to do it."

"But you must first find the hand that struck my father down in yon room."

"That shall be done also."

"After that the other intervention."

"What if both trails run into one?"

"Will they do that?"

"Perhaps, Miss Lotty. My mission is to punish the guilty, and I shall do it, no matter what the crime has been. It may be murder or forgery."

The young lady started at this.

"Is there a sign of forgery?"

"There may be two crimes. The darker one was enacted beneath this roof, the other may have been committed across the sea."

She did not appear to fathom the depths of his answer, but she did not press him for information.

"Now for the other man!" said the ferret to himself when he trod the city's stones again. "I begin to see the motive for the murder. It had to be done to carry out the plot. I owe you something for your keen eyes and your thoughtfulness, Zara. I will not forget you when it comes to distributing the spoils of the game."

With the fall of the night Joe Nichols opened a door some distance from his own den and leaned across a step, saying:

"Are you in, Splinters?"

There was no answer, and he shut the door and glided off.

In half an hour he came back and repeated the query, but with the same result.

This time, however, he closed the door and remained in the room.

In ten minutes a footfall came to the portal and stopped on the outside.

Splinters came in, and the lighting of the gas let him see his visitor.

The little man let out a cry of astonishment, but the detective put him somewhat at his ease.

"I've been waiting for you. Don't be shabbing out now, Splinters."

"But you know what I've said, Joe? I can't help you much because I didn't cry when the dagger killed Duke Daniels."

"Of course you didn't, and you've not shed any tears since. I want to tell you something, Splinters."

"Go on."

"You're in danger," said Joe.

The little man started.

"You're in deadly peril, Splinters. There's a shadow in your path, and unless you take the offensive you're apt to feel the hand of the silencer."

The little man leaned toward Joe and looked him searchingly in the face.

"In danger, am I? Let them try to get me out of the way, and they may discover that a little snake kills just like a big one, but in a different manner."

"That's nice talk. But, Splinters, without an ally you're in the net."

"From whence does the blow come? Who is my enemy?"

"Go over all the foes you have. Catalogue them. It won't take you very long. We'll admit that one of them is dead in the person of Duke Daniels."

"Yes, not so much my foe as one whom I hated. Let me see."

Splinters leaned forward, and for half a minute buried his face in his hands.

"Is he a large man?" he asked.

"Perhaps. A large man is the foe you select from among them all, is it, Splinters?"

"Has he a white beard?"

Joe's head inclined forward a little and Splinters eagerly caught at the answer.

"That man wants me, does he?" he cried, his hands shutting as he shot them into the air, only to bring them down upon the table with emphasis. "This is the shadow I have to fear. I knew he had come back."

"He is here looking for you."

"But I've sent a spy after him. I have put a spy on his track. We will find him, and then I may strike first."

"Splinters, this man has you almost in his grasp now."

The little man threw a quick glance toward the door, and stood in the middle of the room in a tremor of fear.

"Where is he? You know, for you have found him, Joe."

"That may be my secret. I may want him to play out his little hand—"

"Heavens! that won't save me."

"Why can't you save yourself? You seek no alliance with any one. You ought to be able to meet and defeat this enemy."

Splinters seemed speechless in the face of this danger; his eyes dilated and crept back into his head, and within the same minute he lost courage.

"You must help me! You don't know this cool head who has come back."

"From where, Splinters?"

"From France. He is not a Frenchman, but an American; but he is as cool as Satan, and as merciless."

"You've met him before?"

"Yes, yes. The only man I really fear in the world is now in this city."

"And he is Major Trumps' friend?"

"Yes."

"And Doctor Baker's ally?"

"More than that."

The detective drew from his pocket a long, slender package, which he opened in the little man's presence.

From it fell upon the table a dagger, with a black handle, and the eye of Splinters seemed to quit his head as he leaned forward with his gaze upon it.

"Did you ever see that dagger before?"

"I have."

"Where?"

Splinters answered first by picking it up and turning it over in his hands.

"It is not the blade that killed Duke Daniels."

"No."

"It is the other dagger," cried Splinters. "It is the larger one, the sign of the plot. Didn't you find it buried in a paper of some kind?"

"I did."

"And you carried it away?"

"Yes, I brought it from the little room behind the library. It was there in the paper embellished with the gruesome coffin."

Splinters shrugged his shoulders and turned his face from the light.

"Now, Splinters, you must give me the motive for that terrible crime. You hold, in part, the secret of the murder on the avenue. You almost know who killed Duke Daniels. You know *why* he fell."

The face of Splinters was a study as Genteel Joe looked at it in the light.

"Come, the time for the unraveling of the plot has arrived. You must put aside your hatred of the dead, Splinters. You must think only of justice and of the fair girl orphaned by the stroke."

"She is *his* child! I can't tell you anything."

"Miserable wretch! You shall!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DETECTIVE'S VICTORY.

Splinters did not know the character of the man he was defying, else he would not have spoken with such resolution.

"Miserable wretch, you shall!" and with this sentence on his lips Genteel Joe seized the other's wrist, and held it in a grip of iron.

Splinters drew back the length of the merciless hand, and looked across the narrow space into the face of the detective.

"Beware," he said, still defiant. "Don't turn me against you, Joe."

"You are next door to an enemy now, and you can go the other step if it pleases you."

"But I don't care to."

"The truth or the exposure! Tell me why Duke Daniels fell beneath the dagger of the assassin, and you can walk from this room unmolested."

"If I refuse, what?"

"The future will tell."

Once more across the space shot the defiant glance of Splinters.

Joe, the detective, did not relinquish his hold; indeed, his hand seemed to sink deeper into the man's flesh, and to drive by its vise-like grip every vestige of color from his face.

Splinters reflected a moment, and seemed to back down. It would not do for him to make an enemy of this keen ferret, and lose the friendship that had existed between them for years.

"Let up, and I'll tell you," he said.

Genteel Joe pulled Splinters into the chair, and sat opposite him.

"I don't care about harming you, Splinters, but this is a matter of desperate remedies. You know why Duke Daniels was murdered. You know something about the pierced paper, with the embellished head. Now, go on."

The little man evidently thought of his bargain with Dipps.

If he unbosomed himself to Genteel Joe would he not miss the spoils of the game he had planned with Dipps, the maimed?

Dipps was to discover where General Capulet lived, and after that they were to bleed the passenger of the Paris.

But to tell the truth to Joe Nichols would be to balk himself, and he hesitated.

"Go on," repeated the detective. "I can't wait till the day of judgment."

Splinters took a long breath, and, in the taking of it, decided on his line of action.

"He was killed for vengeance."

"By whom?"

"By the avenger."

"Come, no humor, Splinters. This is a matter of seriousness. It is a case of life and death. The dagger that killed millionaire Daniels was not the one I found in the table in the secret room."

"Perhaps not."

"You know it was not the same. The stab in the neck was made by a narrow blade with a needle point, and the steel found the heart of the victim. The other dagger was left in the secret room for a purpose. Was it left there by the murderer?"

"Why not? They tell me that a secret door leads from the library to the other chamber."

"And a hidden stairway to a lower passage, which in turn lets one out upon the porch in the rear of the mansion."

"You know these things, I see. You have hunted the house over."

"That was my duty. I wanted a clew."

"Yes, yes. Now, what else did you find in the little passage, Joe?"

"What do you think would be found in the dark passage?"

Splinters shook his head.

"You remember the boot mark you discovered in the corner of the corridor leading to my den, Splinters?"

"I do."

"Well, I found its counterpart in the narrow passage in the mansion."

"The boot-heel with the cross of nails in it. I recall it distinctly."

"It was there in the dust in the dark. It was very plain when I threw the light of my lantern on it."

"That's a clew, Joe."

"Who wears a boot-heel like that?"

The little man solemnly shook his head.

"You don't know?"

"I don't, Joe."

"Maybe you never paid much attention to boot-heels."

"I never do. Why should I?"

"True; but wouldn't a heel of that kind affect you, if seen?"

"It might."

"And you tell me that you don't know who makes such a print?"

"I tell you that, Joe."

Splinters spoke with positiveness, and his voice was calm and steady; his eye, too, rested upon the detective and followed his look across the room.

"You are a good actor, Splinters," said the ferret, with a smile, at which the little man started some.

"You don't believe me."

"I don't."

"Joe—"

"You are a monumental liar."

"This is too much!"

"Make the most of it. You lie like a Thug."

"In what way?"

"You have seen a boot-heel just like that one."

"I?"

"No one else but yourself."

"This is too bad."

"I turn you over to the hunter. I wash my hands of all he does with you."

"You won't protect me, Joe?"

"Protect you? Why should I?"

"I have tried to be as concise as possible."

"You have spun a specious story for the purpose of keeping me from the quarry."

"Prove it."

"I will."

Genteel Joe dived one hand into his pocket and pulled forth a torn sheet of paper, which he spread out on the table.

Splinters leaned forward and let his gaze feast upon it a second, when he lifted his eyes to the cool detective.

"Heavens! where did you get that?"

"Never mind. Is it genuine, Splinters?"

"It is."

"You don't deny the charges written here?"

"I dare not."

"This paper came from the desk of the dead! It was left behind by Duke Daniels and probably the murderer overlooked it."

"Doubtless. It is a terrible paper to be lying around loose in the way of the roving eye."

"Terrible to the man whose name appears on the sheet."

"That's what I mean."

"This paper, undoubtedly penned by Duke Daniels, accuses you of a crime which you do not deny."

Splinters recoiled with one finger directed at the torn sheet, and his lips white and bloodless.

"I hold this in my keeping. It is the terrible truth that can crush you without a moment's notice. It reveals the source of your hatred; it tells the story of your hate for the murdered millionaire."

There was no reply. Splinters stood like a man struck dumb by some terrible accusation, and his eyes rolled in his head.

"I would not have dreamed this."

"It is true."

"He never recognized you?"

"Never."

"Did you ever go to him for recognition?"

"More than once."

"It would seem so from the language on this sheet. You threatened him. You went thither with the intention of bleeding him or driving Miss Lotty from home."

"I wanted my rights."

"You wanted to blackmail him; you went thither ready for any foul deed. You tried to make him pay over to you a million, and why? Answer me, Splinters?"

"The paper tells you. Isn't that answer enough?"

"The sentences are a little disjointed, showing that the document was written under a great strain, probably just after your last visit. You knew the secret of the passageway to the library."

Splinters did not speak, but his gaze sought the floor at his feet.

"You went thither the last time armed, and nothing but his coolness and strength prevented a tragedy."

"I went after my rights—recognition or a million," snapped the little man, showing his teeth like a hyena. "I see that you have the written proof of what has been a secret between me and the dead. I dare not face you and deny it."

"You may if you wish, Splinters, but the denial won't go."

Genteel Joe rested one hand on the paper and looked over it into the face of the little man.

"Stand over there against the door, please," he said, and Splinters backed away. "There, that will do. Now, sir, lift your hand to heaven and swear that you don't know why Duke Daniels was killed in the library. Swear it, Splinters."

"I can't do that, Joe. I won't."

"Very well. Now, if you will, answer but one question: Weren't you in the house that night?"

"You don't suspect me, Joe?"

"I have said nothing in that direction. You were under the millionaire's roof the night of the murder."

Splinters looked away and swallowed hard.

"Come," said Genteel Joe, rising, "tell me the truth. You were in the house that night!"

Splinters's hands seemed to drop listless at his sides. He tottered forward and dropped into a chair, his face livid, his eyes almost set.

"God pardon me! I was there that night—in the house!"

The implacable detective had conquered.

CHAPTER XX.

DIPPS TURNS A NEW LEAF.

Poor Dipps had been terribly caught in the doctor's trap.

The electric mat held him beyond all attempts to get away, and the mad eyes of the Demon Doctor glared at him over the top of the stairs.

Dipps seemed to have lost the power of speech, for he looked at the doctor and did not articulate.

For some time Doctor Baker continued to look at his victim, and then he came on and stood just beyond the mat.

Dipps could only eye him, and wonder what would follow his discovery.

"You were about to rob me?" said Doctor Baker.

About to rob him! Then he did not suspect that the crime had been consummated.

"You came to the laboratory to plunder it. You were going to make me a poor man."

At the same time the hand of the Demon Doctor reached toward the wall, and the next moment Dipps fell aside, released from the mat, but pain-struck in every nerve.

The hand of Doctor Baker clutched him and pulled him forward. The doctor's face almost touched Dipps's.

He conducted his prisoner down stairs, and shut the door of a little room behind them.

"Sit down."

Dipps obeyed. He would not have done otherwise for the world.

"Did your own brain devise this bit of cunning?" asked the doctor.

"Pardon me, it did. It was my infernal curiosity."

"You wanted to behold the secrets of the laboratory, did you?"

"Yes."

"Wait."

Doctor Baker threw out one foot, and Dipps saw him press it to the floor, while at the same time he was held fast in the chair by an unseen power.

"You're safe now for a spell. I'll be back in a little while."

Dipps was left alone. He saw the doctor depart, and heard him on the stairway leading to the laboratory.

He was going up to investigate if anything had been taken.

A fire burned before Dipps, and he looked at the grate, and thought of the stolen phial.

Here was his chance, and he could throw it into the fire and get rid of it.

But when he pulled it out and looked at it another thought flitted through his mind.

After all he might get away with it, and it was the antidote for the poison of the labarri.

He put it back just as footsteps sounded once more on the staircase, and then he watched the door.

Jared Baker came back, his imperturbable face telling nothing and his nerves calm.

"It's all right up there. I guess you didn't get beyond the door, Dipps. But your intentions were not just as honest as they should have been. So no one sent you."

"No one. I could not beat down this curiosity. I have heard so much about you—"

"I have a reputation beyond this house, have I? I am known away from home?"

Dipps nodded.

"That's good. Where I am known I am feared. Understand that, Dipps. You can go."

The man with the maimed hand stood erect and looked at his tormentor.

"You're free, I say. I am not the merciless man they call me. I have a heart like other people, and am as much man as monster."

Dolliver Dipps did not stand on the order of his going, but sprang from the room, and thence to the sidewalk.

He had been more than an hour from Major Trumps, and that master was waiting for his report.

Dipps hastened toward the house.

He did not stop to ring the bell, but opened the door with a latch key, and bounded toward the parlor door.

"Back at last?" cried a voice as Dipps entered. "I thought the snakes had caught you."

"I have passed through an experience worse than meeting the serpents of death," cried Dipps, as he sank into a chair. "He came home."

"And found you in the house?" exclaimed the Major. "That was bad."

"Yes, but you see I couldn't help it."

"Why didn't you hide and remain hidden till he retired?"

"The mat caught me."

Major Trumps broke into a laugh which brought no merriment to Dipps's pale countenance.

"I had forgotten the little contrivance, or I would have posted you. It is at the door of the laboratory. I dare say it holds one securely."

"That's what it was put there for," cried poor Dipps, shuddering. "But for all that I came off with a whole skin."

"Then you didn't get the phial?"

A grin suffused Dipps's face, and he handed over the little bottle.

"That is it. You found it at the end of the third shelf?"

"There's where it was."

Major Trumps held the phial between him and the light and smiled as the liquid grew darker as he tipped it a little.

"This is life—life, Dipps," he cried. "This kills the venom of the yellow destroyers."

"I guessed at that."

"Did you? Well, you were right. It is life, I say!"

The major placed the phial on the table and grew confidential.

"Did he suspect me, Dipps? Of course he questioned you ere he let you go."

"He did—tried to pump me, but it did no good."

"You're a trump."

"I tried to be, for you see I had my own interests at stake as well as yours."

"Of course. I realize the terrible situation in which you were placed. It must have been a trying one."

"Don't send me back," cried Dipps, putting out his hands. "I won't go."

"You shall not be sent, for you've done your duty nobly. Now, Dipps, my boy, you shall be rewarded."

Major Trumps drew his pocketbook and threw some bills upon the table.

These were eagerly caught up by Dipps and stowed away, and the next moment the little man was gone.

Major Trumps remained at the table feasting his eyes on the phial on the cloth.

"It's a ten strike," said he, in his glee. "It arms me as never have I been armed before. I am as powerful as the doctor from this time on, and the fangs of the death reptiles have no fears for me. I stand on an equality with you, Jared Baker, and you cannot drive me from the game till I've won."

He did not put the phial away for some time, and then he slipped it into a secret cupboard in the wall, the door of which was ingeniously concealed.

As for Dipps, he made his way back to his own quarters, where he ran across Splinters, who sat in his only chair with a white face and staring eyes.

"Did you find where he lives?" asked Splinters.

"I got into other work."

The face of Splinters grew dark in a frown.

"But that was the bargain—you were to find out Whitebeard's hiding place. After that we would try our little hand and reap the rich harvest."

"But listen to me, Splinters. There's something of more importance than that just now."

"What is it?"

"I've another secret."

"Go on. What makes you stop?"

"I have found the antidote."

"The—what? You don't tell me that you've penetrated Doctor Baker's great secret?"

"I found the life bottle to-night."

"Let me see it, then."

Splinters held out his hand, but Dipps looked at it and shook his head.

"I haven't got it."

"Oh, you hadn't the nerve to carry off the bottle. You let it remain where it was, and it is as harmless there as if it were at the end of the world."

"I gave it away."

"You turned it over to your master, you mean?"

"I gave it to the major. I had to."

"Yes, ever the major! What will you do, Dipps, when he is dead or when the hand of this detective called Genteel Joe lands his fish?"

Dipps started and looked up.

"I don't blame you for handing the life phial over to the major, but you might have abstracted some of its contents."

"I dared not. I did not know how to handle the accursed thing."

"If you had brought it to me—"

"I never thought of that."

"Never mind, Dipps. We'll get another play. Now for Whitebeard. I know where he hides."

"You discovered, then?"

"I found out accidentally. I know where he is. Now for the first play. Tomorrow a thunderbolt will fall at his feet. I know too much for him. This man has just crossed the sea and landed in New York, but his hand was felt here before he landed. He sent some of his work in advance."

"But he may be dangerous."

"What if he is?"

Genteel Joe's Lone Hand.

"That should make us cautious."

"Of course. Now, here's a play, Dipps. To-morrow you will present yourself at the home of Miss Lotty Daniels and ask her what she will pay us for a decided clew to the mystery."

Dipps did not speak.

"You will repeat the story I have marked out, which is a very plausible one—"

"But have you the clew?"

"Haven't I, though!"

"Why not take it to Genteel Joe?"

"Never!" the eyes of Splinters flashed. "Take it to that sleuthhound? I guess not! We will either sell out to Miss Lotty or to Doctor Baker."

"Will the doctor buy?"

"Time will tell. Now, good-night, Dipps."

Splinters slipped away and Dipps listened to his footsteps on the stairs till they died away.

"I want to get out of this infernal tangle," he muttered. "I'm in too deep now. I know what I'll do. I'll take the whole story to Genteel Joe, and take it now."

He sprang up and caught his hat from the bed, and the next moment Dipps was going toward the street, resolved to find the man of many trails.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ENTRAPPED FERRET.

The next morning, after his interview with Splinters, Genteel Joe received an invitation to call on the Demon Doctor.

The invitation came a little ahead of the hour he had set for such a call and he went at once.

Doctor Baker lived in luxurious quarters.

The house was a three-story stone affair, and the office door was to the left of the main entrance.

When the detective rang the bell at this door it was nearly ten o'clock, and the door opening at once let him into Doctor Baker's well carpeted office.

The surroundings betokened wealth, and the carpet gave forth no sound as the feet of doctor and patient pressed it.

Doctor Baker, with a smile on his handsome face, greeted the ferret, and they adjourned at once to another room just off from the little one, where Genteel Joe was invited to be seated.

"I have summoned you here," said the Demon Doctor, "to make a few observations in the line of your duty."

"And I will be glad to hear them."

"Poor Daniels must have had a terrible foe. The knife point reached the heart, and it took but one blow to send it there."

"That is true. It was a death stroke, and it seemed to paralyze every nerve and muscle."

"That is correct, as the autopsy showed. The person who came to take life carried away the dagger and left in its stead nothing to give you a clew."

"You forget the other dagger in the room off from the library, doctor."

"No, I recall it distinctly. It was not the blade that killed. It was a dagger of a different size and shape. The deadly one with its fine blade and sharp point did the deed instantly. It was made to kill. Now, if you could only find the motive for the crime—if this enemy could be unmasked and his grievance discovered—you might not find the trail so dark and clewless."

"That seems to be the sticking point. Miss Lotty says she was wide awake all the time that night, and would have heard the murderer come in if he came by the front door."

"The young lady is inclined a little to nervousness. She may not have been on the alert, as she says she was."

"Or the enemy might have been concealed in the house."

"I have thought of that, but after due consideration I have dismissed that suspicion."

Doctor Baker moved his chair closer to the table and opened a drawer.

He drew forth a diagram of the interior of the dead man's house and ran his finger over it.

He pointed out certain rooms and passages, and all the while suggested that such and such a passage might have carried the unseen enemy to his victim.

Genteel Joe looked on and kept silent.

"It's mysterious, to say the least," he said at last.

"The more we discuss it the darker it becomes. I thought I would be enabled to enlighten you with my diagram and suggestions, but I see you have gone carefully over the ground before this."

"I think you will find me ahead of you in every trail," smiled Joe.

"Now the sudden death of Savage, the coachman, is startling, but not very strange. The man's heart was diseased; he was liable to go at any time."

"You are sure, doctor, he did not die from a bite of some kind?"

"Bless you no, Nichols. What would have bitten the coachman in that house?"

"Really, I cannot say, but Miss Lotty said that there was a red mark on the man's wrist; that it did not last long—"

"He may have struck the wrist on falling. He was found dead in his chair. Why, you were in the house at the time."

"Yes, and I thought I, too, saw the crimson mark."

"Natural, perfectly so. Savage was overwrought about the death of his master, and it hastened the end. I will vouch for this."

Joe Nichols did not mention the reptile which he had seen clinging to Savage's wrist that night of adventure in the millionaire's mansion.

He merely looked across the space that separated them and kept his counsel.

"Miss Lotty," said he, adroitly changing the subject, "tells me that there is a startling clause in her father's will."

"She regards it as startling, does she? Why, it seems but the payment of an old debt."

"She had never heard of Major Trumps."

"That may be, but her father had."

"And he thought of the debt when he came to make his last will and testament."

"Was it not natural that he should. That man saved his life in Paris once."

"I thought there might be something of the kind involved in the secret when I heard of the clause."

"She will carry out the will, will she not?"

"Yes, much as it tries her, she is determined to do so."

"The girl is sensible. Her father would not have made the bequest if he did not have the utmost confidence in his child. She will not lose by her action, for Major Trumps is a man who can make her happy."

"You know him?"

"He is a friend of mine, and I think is to be congratulated."

"But the strange part of it all to me is the fact that Major Trumps did not seek the society of Duke Daniels before this, and let Lotty see something of her future husband."

"He is modest, the major is. She will learn this as their married life flits on. I am glad to know that she will carry out the provisions of the will."

Half an hour later, as the detective rose to go, Doctor Baker invited him up stairs.

"I want to show you my laboratory. I happen to have a den on the third floor, and you may have a fancy for the mysterious in chemicals."

Genteel Joe followed at the doctor's heels, and was ushered into the laboratory.

It was the first visit to it, and he stood looking at the different things which the voluble doctor explained.

"I spend much of my time here. I come up often and stay long. They say I neglect my practice by so doing, but really I don't have to practice any more."

"You will abandon medicine altogether some day for the laboratory?"

"Yes, that's the idea. There is so much undiscovered. This little phial contains the results of years of toil. I could hold the fluid in a teaspoon, and yet I have lost sleep over the little particles of green—sleep and flesh."

"It must be a wonderful potion, doctor."

"It is. It is life and death," was the reply.

He talked volubly while he experimented with his chemicals, and the detective seemed to forget where he was.

The laboratory was filled with light from a pair of electric globes overhead, but all at once they went out.

Genteel Joe found himself alone in the laboratory, for no one replied to his call, and he felt his way around the room without touching his companion.

Back to the place where he started from came the detective, and the room still remained in darkness.

His hand found the door, and he turned the knob, but the portal did not open.

"Is this a trap—an experiment of Doctor Baker's?" he asked himself. "Is this a trick of his to show me that he is a master of the secret sciences?"

Again he found the door, but still it would not yield.

At last Joe struck a match.

The flame leaped up, but as suddenly died away, and the darkness became doubly intense.

The detective struck the door with his fists, and then listened, as the sound seemed to find an echo beyond.

"There must be a way to bring light into this room," he thought. "If I am a prisoner in the Demon Doctor's laboratory I must find a way out. He shall not play out his game now. I see all now. I was called thither to be played against with the cards in his hand."

He found the brass handles of the globes, but they would not flood the room with light.

"It is true! I am in the trap!" he cried, falling back.

Genteel Joe leaned against the bench and thought rapidly.

Not a sound came to his ears now.

He felt back, but the shelves which he had seen a few moments before were gone, and a blank wall was all he touched.

He was in a house of mystery, in a den of death.

The detective went to the end of the laboratory and stopped.

He heard at last a noise, but it came from beyond the wall, and he heard it but indistinctly.

In another moment, however, he heard a louder sound, and then the door opened suddenly.

Doctor Baker stood on the threshold.

"I beg your pardon. I was forced to leave you, and I dared not take you along, so I just locked you in. The light went out through a fault of mine, but it's all right now."

Once more the laboratory was flooded with light, and the detective looked into the doctor's face.

It was not the same face he had seen before.

The eyes had a snap they had not hitherto known, and the skin was almost yellow.

"We'll go down now," said Doctor Baker.

Genteel Joe placed his hand on his revolver as he stepped from the apartment.

The Demon Doctor was dangerous; he was the man he had to dread above all others, and he now watched him like a hawk.

Joe was midway down the stairs when he felt the steps falling.

In an instant he reached out after the doctor's collar, but missed it by a hair, and the next instant there rang out on the air a laugh filled with diabolism.

The city detective leaped back, but too late.

There was nothing beneath his feet; the whole stairs seemed to have vanished.

and he was falling, falling through utter blackness.

Genteel Joe had no time for thought in the terrible descent, but before his eyes danced a wild light and in it all he saw the leering face of Jared Baker, the Demon Doctor of Gotham.

The man monster was his deadliest foe.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHITEBEARD'S FATE.

At almost the same hour of the springing of Doctor Baker's trap on the detective, but in a different part of the city, stood a man who seemed to be watching another.

This person had pulled his collar around his throat, but for all this he could not entirely hide the white beard that clothed his face.

When the person watched so closely came along the watcher fell in behind him, and the two tramped onward under the gaslights.

At the end of ten minutes the tracked person turned into a side street and entered a small house.

Immediately the tracker followed to the door, and pushed the door open.

As the watched one turned in the hall with the light of the match he had struck in his face, he uttered a cry, and staggered against the wall.

"Not a word! Your life depends on your silence," hissed the white-bearded man, approaching and bending forward, the collar falling from his face, revealing it in full. "You know me, and I've found you at last. This is your house? Good! You are at home here, and I can tell you what I want done."

"Come into this room, then," and the speaker opened a door at his right.

"How have you fared?" asked General Capulet, or Whitebeard. "I see you're looking as if life agreed with you. You're Goldstein now."

"Yes. Isn't it a name that fits me well?"

"Oh, as to that, any name will do. You've dropped the old dress and wear another."

"I wear another."

"Well, Goldstein—I call you by the last name, you see—you are trying to beat me again."

There was no reply to this, the face of Goldstein getting white while he eyed the man over against the wall, where he sat in a chair and glared at him.

Capulet's hands were gloved, and rested lightly on the arms of the seat.

"Did you know I had come over?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who told you?"

"Never mind that. I don't care to give my friend away."

"Some spy told you, no doubt. You may have been looking for me."

"Don't you really think I had a right to look out for you?"

"You had, for I have as many lives as a cat, and you should have been on the lookout. But, coming down to business, Sandy—I go back to the old name, ha, ha!—you are going to quit this world."

There was a quick start on Goldstein's part, and he looked beyond the other's face.

"I am merciless, and, with you in the way, I must be so," continued Whitebeard. "I cannot rest while you live to throw an obstacle in my path."

No answer from the listener.

General Capulet rose and walked the floor, looking askance but searchingly at Goldstein.

"You have good allies. You make allies out of a good many queer people. For instance, you strike a bargain with Dips and with the ferret."

"I never formed an alliance with Genteel Joe."

"That's his name, is it? You didn't tell him that I might be mixed up in Major Trumps's game?"

"I did not," solemnly asserted Goldstein. "I never went to this man."

"But you know him?"

"I'll admit that I do."

"That's the next door to telling him. I say that I am not safe while you live. The old grudge still sticks in your craw, and you will turn on me at the first opportunity. I wouldn't believe to the contrary if you swore to it on a mountain of oaths."

"You have known for years that we cannot agree on the same subject. I didn't want to see you again. I had hoped that we would never come together."

"But all the same as Goldstein you have been watching for me. The old brand is on your bosom."

Goldstein seemed to recoil with a start.

"There! that settles it. You haven't been able to get rid of the little marks. You will wear them to the grave. By Jove! I don't think you are going to be so lucky as to have a grave."

Goldstein measured the distance between him and the cool head across the chamber.

The distance was not great, but it was too much for him to cover, agile as he was.

"Where's the kid?" asked Capulet.

"Dead."

"Liar! He is living, and you will deceive me to the end."

Goldstein looked at his enemy and tried to tone down his own excitement.

"I must be cool headed if I escape this old foe," thought he. "I must play a cold deck on this enemy if I would walk from this place alive. He has tracked me like a tiger; he is here to kill—if I let him."

General Capulet took a long breath and slipped one of his gloves off his long, dangerous looking hand.

Goldstein saw the movement and glanced toward the door.

He was like a cornered rat.

Whitebeard sat between him and the portal, and that ungloved hand had a touch of the horrors to him.

Suddenly Whitebeard sprang back to the wall and faced him.

Goldstein wondered if a spring would not save him, but the very thought as it formed in his mind appeared to be intercepted by the foe.

"Time is up," said Whitebeard. "There's but one way to clear the path, and that is—to clear it. I can't give you another minute, Sandy Black."

In that moment of agony Goldstein heard a footstep on the sidewalk, but it passed the house, and with it went the last hope he had treasured.

General Capulet drew a revolver and wrapped his long fingers about the butt.

"One thing first, Sandy," he said. "You won't refuse to tell the truth ere you enter the Beyond. You can't afford to go into the future silent or with a lie on your lips."

Goldstein looked at him, but did not speak.

"I use noiseless powder. There will be no report when I press the trigger—nothing but the fall of a dead body to the floor. There will be no smoke, and the police may not find you for days."

"Why don't you finish it?" broke out Goldstein. "A man is in torture while you talk. I would better be dead than face death as you hold it before me. I tell you nothing."

"You mean that you won't disclose the secret of the kid?"

"I mean that."

"Consider—"

"I consider. You kill me and the secret dies."

"If I spare, what?"

"It lives."

"And you will disclose it?"

"I make no promises. I tell you nothing definite. You came back as General Capulet. You will soon be unmasked. Don't you know that you will become but the tool of this merciless owner of the little reptiles, if not at last his victim?"

"How's that?"

"You will become the tool or the victim of the doctor of the avenue. They call him a man of medicine, but they don't know this keen rascal. They don't suspect the game he is playing, unless the detective has picked up the clew."

"He is too keen for the keenest tracker. Sandy, I will spare you on one condition. I break my oath if you will act white."

"How?"

"Tell me what became of the kid—of his real heir. You surely know. The girl is the child by the last marriage. The first marriage of Duke Daniels is a secret the thousands of this city never dreamed of. Where is the issue of the first marriage?"

"If I tell you you will kill. Come, we had better part enemies."

The man with the branded breast leaned back in his chair and shut his lips hard.

"Fool!" roared General Capulet. "I offer you life, and you refuse to accept it."

"I don't want it at your hands. Rather than accept life at your hands I prefer to die at your feet as your implacable foe."

A roar of rage came from the bearded lips, and the revolver suddenly leaped into the air.

"You won't disclose the secret?"

"Not to you!"

In another moment the ungloved hand would have sent the death messenger on its errand, but the hand of Goldstein came out from his bosom.

It clutched a little box, almost flat; the fingers seemed to sink into the lid, and the man eyed it wildly as he looked.

All at once he tore the box in two, and the next moment he threw something from it like a shaft from a boomerang.

A wild cry pealed from Capulet's lips as the object hurled from the box hissed through the air, and the pistol dropped.

An arrow never went straighter to its target than did Goldstein's shaft.

General Capulet fell to the floor with a white face.

There was a wriggling object, yellowish and tiny, at his right wrist; it glittered in the light, and its eyes sparkled like gems.

"That's the reserve force I hold for my foes!" cried Goldstein. "You don't want the secret now?"

General Capulet did not reply; he merely gazed at the monster and groaned.

"They tell me that the doctor has discovered an antidote. He may have done so, but it can do you no good. We part forever. We are foes no longer, for the man who will inhabit this house with the labarri for company will never hate nor hunt."

The doomed man threw his arms above his head, and then, in the fury of his madness, tried to uncoil the yellow death.

"You can't undo the deed," coolly said Goldstein. "As Sandy Black, I am the victor. I can now go out there and walk the streets without you to throw your accursed shadow across my way. The game is being played by the cool heads of Doctor Baker and Major Trumps. The tracker is after the clew, and he will find it. There will come a day when this demon spirit will not rule serpentdom and when his antidotes will not save him. Good-by, General Capulet. This is not your triumph, but Goldstein's!"

The answer that came from the white-faced wretch at the door was a wail of unutterable agony.

"Save you?" cried Goldstein. "Save you and still be hunted by you? Never! It is death."

The next moment Goldstein coolly left the house, locking the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DUNGEON'S DEPTHS.

Major Trumps came too late to witness the fall of Genteel Joe beneath the stairs, and too late to see the doctor walk quietly back to the laboratory and sip the contents of a little bottle on the last shelf.

In the rooms below the two men met, the major smiling, but anxious, and Doctor Baker as cool as a desperado.

"It's all arranged, major," said the doctor. "The will is all O. K., and all you have to do is to claim your bride."

The features of the major did not relax, but a look of fear seemed to rest upon them.

"You have seen her, haven't you?"

"Yes. She is quite submissive. The will fixes everything, you know."

"And she is perfectly willing to become Mrs. Trumps according to its terms?"

"Perfectly so."

"It's luck."

"It's more than that. Nothing better could have played in our hands."

"The detective—"

"Come, now, don't inject that disagreeable person into the victory of the hour," broke in Doctor Jared. "I don't care to hear of him at all. The game is yours, and the last card is on the table, a trump."

Major Trumps held out his hand, which the long white fingers of Doctor Baker caught eagerly.

"Shall I find her at once?" queried Major Trumps.

"Yes, and I'll go with you. You will need no introduction—of course not, but it's best for me to accompany you thither."

"Let's be off, then. I'm eager to see if this is not all a dream."

In a few minutes these two worthies might have been seen on the steps of Duke Daniels' mansion, and the bell caused their instant admission.

Lotty awaited them in the hall, and conducted them to the parlor.

She was calm, but almost colorless.

Doctor Baker was cool, and the major, taking advice from him, was likewise.

"My friend the major, here, has been informed of the contents of your father's will and testament," said the former, addressing the girl. "I have come with him for the purpose of seeing that all is satisfactory. He is pleased, of course, at the mark of esteem shown by his unfortunate friend, your father, and—"

The impatient girl made a sudden gesture, which cut the sentence in twain.

"I fully realize the situation," said she, "and I am ready to carry out the provisions of the will. I cannot assure Major Trumps a happy existence with me, for I scarcely know him, and I am free to confess that but for the will I never would for a moment have encouraged his suit."

"We will trust that the more you become acquainted with each other the less you will have to regret your step, miss," said Doctor Baker.

Lotty said nothing, and Major Trumps put in to say that he would remember the friendship of the murdered man and live to protect his daughter as his wife.

"How did I come out?" eagerly queried Major Trumps when he found himself back in the doctor-chemist's office, half an hour later? Did I come up to your expectations?"

"Admirably so. You could not have bettered matters if you had been coached. It's all right, major. We're on the high road to fortune now. After the wedding, which will take place within five days, there will be division number one."

"If we are fortunate enough to reach that day un-molested."

"What! don't you think we will?"

"There's the detective—"

"The devil!" roared the doctor. "If you must have proof that he won't trouble us let me produce it."

Springing up, Doctor Baker led his guest from the room, and thence into a small place beyond.

Here he turned on the lights by touching a button in the wall, and, turning to the major, he jerked him forward.

In another instant he had opened a door set in the wall, and Major Trumps saw nothing but darkness.

"Look down there," cried Doctor Baker.

"It's as dark as Egypt."

"I know that. But look, man; look!"

Major Trumps did so, and all at once the darkness became light and a blinding flash seemed to sweep his eyes from his head.

"What do you see?" asked the doctor-chemist.

"Nothing."

"Keep looking. I'll turn on more light. I'll put the searchlight at work."

For a moment there was no answer, and then a cry came over the major's lips.

"You see it now; don't you?"

"I do."

"What is it like?"

"A man lying on his face at the bottom of a well."

"Look well. He is dead."

"He must be."

"Now think you that the detective will longer haunt your dreams? Can't you sleep well after this?"

Major Trumps felt a thrill run through his blood, and his face was turned suddenly toward the doctor.

"Is that the ferret? Is Genteel Joe Nichols down there?"

"Do you want to go down and look?"

"Gods! no. I am satisfied with what I have seen, but how did you catch the fox?"

"No questions, no fibs, my dear major. The coast is clear. The hand that is to beat down my arms does not exist, save in the realm of the underground dungeon. Come back to the office now. We'll finish the business of the hour."

In the doctor's cosy office the two men sat down, and Jared Baker coolly pushed toward his guest a sheet of paper covered with bold letters.

The little eyes of Major Trumps snapped while he read in silence, and his face changed color.

"That's all right, isn't it?" queried the doctor.

"I—don't—know," stammered the major.

"What's wrong about it?"

"It's giving you the lion's share."

"Who else should have it?"

"True, but what am I to do—carry the load and let another stand off and laugh at my chains?"

"Not at all. If you wish to withdraw from the battle now you can do so. But you lose all."

"I want justice."

"You shall have it. Look here, major, it's not all your fight. I have taken a hand in the game."

"I see you have."

"Without me what would you get?"

The major's lower jaw seemed to drop, and for a moment his gaze rested on the carpet at his feet.

"It's sign that or get nothing. You can take your choice."

Once more the major's eyes came down the sheet on the table, and a sudden impulse seemed to hurl him back.

In another instant he was on his feet.

"I can't give you everything!" he cried. "I must have something. My wife must not be robbed."

"Your wife? When she is your wife we will talk about the other thing. There's the paper, sir. There are pens and ink, and you know how to write your name. To the needs of the hour. To the signature, sir."

The quivering finger of Doctor Baker covered the document on the table.

He was calm, but his expression was that of a lion aroused, and his figure towered in the light like a giant's.

"To the signing! Major Trumps, your life is worth nothing if your name is not attached to that agreement."

The major did not reply.

"It is not to be presented for six months."

"I can't sign that."

"Then to the winds with the contract! You shan't touch a dollar of the dead millionaire's wealth. I say you shall not have the girl for your wife!"

"I can step out."

"But you shall not. Back to your chair!"

The stubborn major did not move a step; he looked across the space that separated them, but did not speak.

"Time was when you dared not command me thus."

"Time is now when you dare not disobey Doctor Jared. You must sign."

The eyes of the major wandered toward the paper, and rested upon it.

He seemed to reflect, and the tall doctor did not speak.

Suddenly the major walked over to the table and caught up the pen.

"There!" he cried, as he dashed his name to the document. "I sign, but not through fear. I sign because you have robbed me, and I want to recruit my shattered fortunes."

The lips of the doctor-chemist curled with a biting sneer, but he made no answer to this.

He coolly reached out and pulled the document toward him, and tossed it into the drawer.

"That's signed now. You can go and prepare for your wedding. Remember, there is to be no backward step from this time on. When Lotty Daniels is Mrs. Trumps, Florence gets her pay."

"Florence!"

The name seemed to come unbidden from the major's tongue, and he looked toward the door.

"Come whenever you care to drop in," continued Doctor Baker. "I am master of the situation."

"No need to tell me that. I know you, Doctor Jared, and I curse the day I crossed your path or you crossed mine."

"Good day, major."

On the threshold the major hesitated, and he looked back across the carpet at the demon who had beaten him.

"Don't think that because the detective has left the trail you are out of danger," smiled Doctor Baker. "There are others. There is Octave, and, yes, and the yellow wrigglers."

Major Trumps' hands clinched, but he kept back the words which almost bubbled from his lips.

On the side-walk he took in a full breath.

"I'm serpent-proof, thanks to Dipps," said he aloud. "Before long, Doctor Jared, I will not be your tool and slave, for Major Trumps will arm himself for the final battle, and if the detective never unravels this skein of crime, these hands of mine, if they're not very white, will strike a blow for personal freedom."

He heard a bitter laugh behind the shutters, and, looking back, thought he caught sight of the grinning face of the doctor-chemist.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FACE IN THE TRUNK.

Genteel Joe, so cleverly caught in the trap set by Doctor Baker, had but little time to collect his thoughts as he felt the stairs giving way under his feet and a terrible doom waiting for him.

He heard the stairs swing back as he alighted in a dense darkness, and, without many bruises from the swift descent, he raised himself and stood against the side of the dungeon.

To him it was a circular structure, and he could not see his hand before his face.

For some time he remained silent, and at last made a trip around the place feeling the walls in the dark and trying to find some way out.

But the Demon Doctor had prepared for all such attempts; and at last the captive of the cell came back to the place where he alighted.

He was the sole occupant of the pit.

Joe did not despair, for he had not been placed in such a position for the purpose of driving hope from his heart, and after awhile he succeeded in reaching a niche in the wall.

It was like finding a step in the darkness.

The detective rose from the floor, and for a little time clung to the wall, while

he wondered if the niche would not turn out a delusion.

Overhead all was still.

He heard nothing of Doctor Baker, but he guessed that the cool villain was seated in his office, perhaps quietly smoking over the success of his trick.

Genteel Joe found above the niche another of like shape and depth.

Perhaps some former victim of the doctor's had been in the pit before him, and had found his way out.

If so, he could follow, and he would not let the place hold him long.

Somewhere overhead must exist a trap door, perhaps in the stairs themselves, and by that passage he might regain his liberty. It was worth trying, even if he was doomed to be dashed back on the threshold of freedom and left to perish in the gloom of the abyss.

He found niche succeeding niche until he could reach up and touch the floor overhead.

Not only this, but he found there a little board which moved, and by pushing it to one side, he saw that he could wriggle through the opening.

While this opening would lead him to another passage apparently underneath the house itself, it was worth trying, and Genteel Joe divested himself of his coat and threw it to the bottom of the pit.

His hat had already fallen there, and now in his shirt sleeves, he was ready for the venture.

Once in the narrow way, he moved slowly forward, and reached another door, which seemed to let him out into the rear yard of the house.

At the end of thirty minutes Genteel Joe, the detective, stood beneath the starlit heavens above the city.

Free!

It thrilled him to think of his flight, and of the blissful ignorance of the Demon Doctor in his office.

Genteel Joe paused a moment, and looked at the house, seeing a light beyond the shutters.

A man in his shirt sleeves at that hour in that portion of the city was not a common sight; but the ferret managed to elude suspicion, and not long afterward found himself in his little den, where he could sit down and reflect over his adventure.

He had escaped from the death pit of the doctor-chemist, and was still on the trail.

He opened a drawer in the table and found writing materials there.

In a few moments he had written a few lines and folded the sheet.

The letter was addressed to Miss Lotty. Posting it, Genteel Joe came back to the den, and began to make some strange preparations.

In the morning the girl would get the letter, and would know how to account for his absence.

He was in the act of quitting the room when there came up the steps a footfall that he recognized.

Joe drew back and secreted himself behind a curtain, which was stretched across one corner of the room.

It was Splinters who came toward the door, and in answer to his knocks silence told him that the detective was not about.

Splinters withdrew, and the ferret followed him.

Joe went down upon the street, and flitted underneath the lamps to a house, which he entered, after a knock.

The woman who greeted him was tall and thin.

She started at sight of the detective, whom she did not seem to recognize and for half a minute a gleam of fear lit up her eyes.

"Why, it's Joe!" she suddenly exclaimed, drawing back and then springing toward the spotter. "In the name of heaven, what brings you here in such feathers?"

"I'm dead, Mother Redbird."

"Dead? Why, to me you're the liveliest corpse I ever saw."

"Nevertheless, I'm dead. You under-

stand that I am not Joe Nichols just now."

"I see," cried the woman, as a light seemed to break in upon her mind. "You're playing a game against some one. Yes, you're dead—as dead as a herring, Joe Nichols; but you'll not be buried just yet."

"I hope not, Mother Redbird. It's only a little game with one or two gentlemen, and you can help me."

"Name the way, Joe."

"I want this nest to be my home till I go back to the old one, or quit the trail by another method."

"It's yours!"

The detective thanked the woman for her kindness, and in a few moments stood once more on the sidewalk looking quite unlike Genteel Joe, the spotter.

He had been in the pit longer than he thought, for the day of his adventure had given way for another night.

Joe made his way back to the narrow street to which on a former occasion he had tracked General Capulet.

There was no light beyond the shutters now.

The little brick house was dark and silent enough, and while the hour was not late, Genteel Joe felt that beyond the door was a mystery he wanted to solve.

His disguise was so perfect that he did not fear detection, and in a moment he was on the step knocking for admittance.

No one responded to his raps, and at last he tried the knob, but it would not turn.

Clearly, the house was not inhabited just then, and he resolved to see more of it.

The rear of the premises afforded him means of getting inside, and the detective stood in a small room, with his little lantern showing him the apartment.

He was the sole tenant of General Capulet's place.

It was not very well furnished, but well enough for a man of his habits, and as Joe sent the beams of his light into the various corners, he looked searchingly around.

Suddenly he opened a door which led to the upper floor, and there stopped a moment.

The staircase that invited did not look like a trap of the pattern he had tested to his sorrow in Doctor Baker's house, and he ascended cautiously.

The chamber overhead was the General's bed-room, and the low bedstead that greeted Genteel Joe was not occupied.

It had not been tumbled for some time, and he leanded over it and threw the lantern light across the counterpane.

General Capulet, or Whitebeard, must have taken the place already furnished, for everything indicated this, and Joe did not inquire into the secret of things.

A trunk on one side of the room attracted him, and he opened it with a key which he fished from his pocket.

The lock was very ordinary, and he was enabled to peep into the trunk without much ado.

The hand of the detective was soon exploring the contents of the trunk, and was just drawing up a lot of things when he heard a footstep behind him, and he turned to look into the face of a strange man.

This individual stopped and then fell back with a light cry of astonishment.

"It is the man called Goldstein," thought Joe. "This must be the person Dips has met."

The detective straightened and stood face to face with the other, who was Goldstein, and who looked at him with a puzzled expression.

Joe advanced a step and Goldstein threw up his hands to ward him off.

"Stand where you are," said Genteel Joe. "A step or a movement on your part may not result in good for you. You came thither to plunder this house."

"I? In heaven's name, what fetches you here?" he cried.

"Perhaps the same errand. He is not at home, and you knew it."

A singular expression came to Goldstein's face, and his eyes seemed to flash.

"He is not at home?" he echoed. "You are right. He may never come back."

"You know where he is?"

"I left him not long ago, but where, is another question. You need not know my secret."

"I don't seek to know it. But come, you are Lukey Goldstein. You are his enemy."

"I have a right to be his foe, but all debts between us have been canceled, and we're square."

"What brought you to this house? What do you want to find?"

Goldstein did not stir, but his gaze wandered to the old trunk, but half-searched by the ferret.

"Is it there?" asked Joe, following his look.

"You have searched it, haven't you?"

"Not fully. You can do that."

Goldstein advanced and stopped in front of the trunk.

"It may not be there," he said, looking up at Genteel Joe.

"Look."

Aided by the disguised detective's light, Goldstein began to ransack the trunk, diving his hands into it and fishing up anything they touched.

All at once he pulled out a little package, which he held up with delight.

"This must be it!" he exclaimed.

He stood erect as he spoke and held the package toward the detective.

"Open it," said Joe.

The packet was tied with a black string, and the knots did not bother Goldstein long.

His nimble hands undid them, and there fell out into his hand an oval picture of a woman's face.

"Who is it?" asked Genteel Joe.

"You don't know, eh? Why should you? That's Florence, his sister, and the wife of Major Trumps."

"Well, what of it?"

"By Jove! man, if you knew what I did, you could stop a marriage and save a young girl, for a man can't have two wives at once in New York."

CHAPTER XXV.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

Goldstein's gaze fell upon the picture, and for a little while he seemed to be living over the past.

Genteel Joe watched him narrowly, and when he looked up he said, quietly:

"You came hither to find that picture. You expected it would be in the trunk over there?"

"I wasn't very sure of it. I felt that he might have Florence's face somewhere about the house, but I really came after something of more importance to me."

He looked back at the opened trunk, and without another word stepped over to it.

Joe followed, and stood over him while he searched it.

"Maybe," said Goldstein, with an arch smile, "maybe you are the sort of person I'm looking for."

"I may be."

Goldstein's hands stopped, and he asked:

"Who are you?"

"Dick—Dick Darrell, or Diamond Dick."

"A crook?"

"You may call me that if you wish."

"I've heard of Diamond Dick. I ought to shake hands with you."

Joe held out his hand, and the fingers of Goldstein covered it.

"There's a dead sure play in this for us, Dick," Goldstein said.

"That's good. Go on."

"We won't be bothered any more by the General, as he is called, though he has another name. We need not fear that he will return to haunt us. But there's a deeper play than merely searching a man's luggage."

"This is only a side issue, eh?"

"That's all. We can feather our nests."

"That's what I want to do, Goldstein."

"Tell me—tell me, Dick, how you know me?"

Joe was equal to the emergency.

"We don't forget anybody. You have a little reputation yourself, you know, and I never forget men."

"You're all right. We're crooks, so called, though you won't find me much on the crook order. I'm proud of your help, for, as Diamond Dick, you have a head that's worth something, and I have the hands and the secret."

"The secret?"

"Yes, yes. Wait till I have gone through this trunk. It may yield something else."

Joe held the light while he waited.

Goldstein went back to his task, and at last rose without finding anything else to tempt him.

He had placed the picture on a table, and now went over to it and picked it up.

"You don't know Florence," said he. "She is a cool woman, like her brother was. Major Trumps can play her for a hidden card whenever the case demands it, and just now she is in the background, while the hand is being played. Where there's money in it for Florence, she isn't particular, but just convince her that they intend to rob her of one dollar of her share, and the jig is up."

"Will they do that?"

"Bless you, if you knew the men engaged in the game you wouldn't ask me that. They're the most accomplished rogues in the world, but the major isn't the equal of the other."

"General Capulet?"

"No, the doctor."

Joe professed astonishment.

"So there's a doctor in the case, is there?"

"Yes, and a cool-headed disciple of the Borgias. I don't mean that he deals in poisons, as many people do, but all the same he carries death wherever he goes."

Goldstein took a quick turn about the room, and then came back to his companion.

"Let's get out of this, Dick. Perhaps if I had dreamed that I would find you here to-night I would have taken another time for my little hunt, but, now that we've met, we'll make the best of the encounter."

"That's right, but this game of yours? How shall we proceed?"

"I am going to strike it rich, and I don't mind sharing with you, Dick, for the help you may give."

"You'll find me ready at all times. Diamond Dick knows a thing or two in his line, and—"

"That's it, exactly. I may want to play two hands at once, and there's a fair divide in it. But there's danger."

"There ought to be, to give zest to the game."

"You don't know the men we have to meet. You have never heard of the doctor and his pets."

"He has pets, then, this doctor?"

"Deadly pets! He is the keeper of the deadliest living things in the world, and he does not hesitate to use them."

"There's danger in the game, sure enough, and that interests me. But why not come out and post me, Goldstein, since I am to help in this game for a fortune?"

"I'm going to post you," and Goldstein leaned against the table, the light of the sharp lantern falling full upon his dark face.

"It's Doctor Baker we've got to deal with—the doctor and the major; General Capulet, or Whitebeard, as I sometimes call him, is out of the play—where, never mind."

"He won't come back, Goldstein?"

"Come back? He can't!"

"That's good. Now for the others."

"Major Trumps is about to become the husband of as fair a girl as lives in this city. He has played for her hand

under the surface, and the game planned by that prince of cool heads, Doctor Baker, is sure to win, unless we block it."

"Why not let it win, and then play our hand?"

"There's something in that, but there's the girl. I'm not tender-hearted, but I don't like to see this man blight her life. You see, General Capulet did the clerical work for the plot. His fine Italian hand is deep in the game, and he drew up the false will. That's the plan they've taken to get the girl and the fortune which falls to her."

"Oh, there's a false will in the scheme, is there?"

"Yes, and the hand of Capulet drew it up. Maybe he didn't do the work in this country; maybe he did it across the water, but it was done all the same, and the play is going on swimmingly. One can hardly believe the cunning of these three men, but the great head of the scheme sits serenely on Jared Baker's shoulders."

Goldstein rested a moment, and looked again at the open trunk.

"Here it is in a nutshell," he went on. "Some time ago a man named Duke Daniels was found dead in his library. He lived like a king, did this man, and had all the money he wanted. He lived with his only child by his last marriage, for he contracted another marriage, but it was a failure, and death relieved him of a disagreeable partner soon afterward."

"The city at large is not aware that Duke Daniels had a past not very pleasant to contemplate, but it is true. He had one or two chapters in his life which he didn't parade in public, and Lotty, his daughter, did not know of them. She was horrified when her father was found dead in the chair with a dagger stab in the neck, which found the heart. I heard a good deal about this by a friend who stood in with the detective who entered the case. It was a death stab and no clew. In another room, just off from the library, the ferret found another dagger, which pinned a paper to a table, and on this paper was a pictured coffin, embellished with the murdered man's name."

"That all looks like the work of a vendetta or a secret enemy, at least. It was given that color by the person who did the deed, and the detective seems to have taken that view of the mystery. What was more natural, Dick? A dead man in one room, and in the next one a dagger in the table, and pierced paper filled with words of vengeance."

"It was quite enough to give the detective a clew," said Joe Nichols.

"It was an adroit game. It was a part of the plot to deceive this tracker, who is one of the best on any trail. But don't you see the hand of the plotter in it all? Here is Major Trumps going to marry the heiress of the dead, and here's a will giving her to him. What's more monumental than that in the way of villainy?"

"General Capulet sends the will back from France or some other part of the world, and it is placed in the millionaire's safe or desk. The real will, perhaps, is fished by some one on the ground, and at the right time there's a death in the house, and the game is on. What's cooler, Dick?"

Goldstein stopped for half a second to note the effects of his last observation, but as his auditor did not reply, he proceeded:

"The detective has no clew yet. He is groping in the dark, with the plotters ready at the right time to brush him from their path. He may be shrewd and cool-headed, but while he plays against an unseen enemy, you and I, Diamond Dick, can be reaping the results of our play. It's a great future, eh? It's the best thing I've struck in a year. I can play a hand against them all, for all I have to do is to post Florence."

"General Capulet's sister and Major Trumps' wife?"

"Yes. She knows of the plot, but she

does not know that Doctor Baker is ready to sacrifice her when it becomes necessary. Florence is jealous and nervy. She won't brook any interference with her plans, and while she is willing to see the marriage take place, she will never let the plotters take the lion's share to themselves. I know Florence. I can play her for a great card against the pair."

"But the detective might step in and find the hand that slew Duke Daniels?" suggested Genteel Joe.

"He won't do that, for they have covered their tracks so well. Genteel Joe, as this detective is called, is shrewd, but not quite shrewd enough for the plot. The crime is known, and the victim is under the ground, but the hand that killed is hidden. It is one of three hands, as I believe the ferret thinks, and while he hesitates, we can step in and reap the golden harvest."

"It's a nice plan, Goldstein, and I trust in your ability to carry it out, but tell me whom you suspect of the murder."

A singular expression crossed Goldstein's face, and rendered it dark for a moment. He seemed to recoil from the table, and for a little time did not speak.

"I don't see that that enters into our game at all," he said evasively.

"I do. We might want to turn a card on the assassin some time. It may be to our interest to do so, and we might turn it on the wrong man, which would never do."

"No, of course it wouldn't. But let the detective grope in the dark. Why, man, I can make it darker still for him, and we can throw him off the trail if necessary."

"If we play only for ourselves, and have no care for the rights of justice."

"I don't give that for such rights! I'm for the feathered nest, and I don't care how many times justice is balked. It's every fellow for himself in this world."

Joe broke Goldstein's sentence by laying a hand on his wrist.

"That's right, but if we would save this girl we must be prepared to tell what we know or believe about the death of her father and the forged will."

Goldstein's eyes suddenly dilated, and he uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Why, you're getting uncommon good for a man of your kind. Tell the police, eh? Is that what you mean? Tell them who killed Duke Daniels and get nothing for all our pains? You don't seem to take in the situation. I guess you're not the man you're cracked up to be. Tell them nothing! Let the detective fail, but save the girl and feather our nests. That's it!"

The disguised detective looked on and kept silent.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DIPPS MAKES A POOR PLAY.

The little light Dipps had let in upon Goldstein's character did not show Genteel Joe the true depths of the man's depravity.

He now saw before him an unconscionable rascal, a man ready to do the bidding of his baser nature, and the only streak of good in it was his willingness to snatch Lotty Daniels from the snare, and to save her from becoming Major Trumps' bride.

The detective waited a little while after Goldstein's last sentence before he again addressed him.

"You want to save the girl, but you don't want to run the risk of not feathering your nest."

"By Jove; if I can't succeed in any other way, why, I'm willing to let the wedding occur, and strike them afterward."

"I see. You don't care for anything but your own aims."

"That's about it. Men of our kind don't take care of other people's interests. That's the way of the world. It's hawk and buzzard, isn't it? See here. We must quit this place. You can have the picture. General Capulet won't come for

it, and besides, you may want to make Florence's acquaintance one of these days."

Genteel Joe pocketed the photograph and went toward the door, curiously watched by Goldstein.

All at once the man with the branded breast called a halt, and the detective looked back.

"You don't look much like the Dick I used to know. You haven't got his step."

The crisis had come, but Genteel Joe did not lose his nerve.

"Prove that I'm not Dick. You can accuse without proof, but when it comes down to business you are at fault. Not Diamond Dick?"

"I didn't say that—"

"Who am I, then?"

A stride carried him to where Goldstein was, but the marked man seemed to recoil.

"I guess you're all right," he said, extending his hand. "I'll risk it, anyhow. It's a game between us, ain't it? Going?"

"Yes. Keep your eye open, Goldstein. Don't let them steal a march on us. It's a great game, and if we lose it, why, the jig's up."

"We won't lose if you play fair."

"Then we win, Goldy."

The detective passed from the house and flitted away. He went back to Mother Redbird's, and the old woman set her keen eyes upon him.

"Did you see the fellow outside?" she asked.

"A man outside?"

"Yes; he was sneaking about the house not twenty minutes ago. He may be out there yet."

"I did not see him."

Had he been followed already? Was a spy on his track, and had his escape from the pit beneath Doctor Baker's stairs been discovered?

Genteel Joe went out cautiously and stood in the shadows of the house.

For five minutes he heard nothing, saw no foe, but all at once a silken footstep came to his ears, and he saw a little figure emerge from between two houses. Joe watched it, and stood still.

It slipped up to the window of Mother Redbird's nest, and seemed to press its face to the shutter.

It did not remain long, but fell back, and then, with a farewell glance at the house, slipped away, to vanish around the first corner.

"Splinters!" said Joe, under his breath. "The little fellow suspects."

The man who had glided from the house soon vanished, and in a little time was some squares from the spot.

Genteel Joe looked in upon Mother Redbird a moment, and then took the trail.

Splinters might have recognized him, which was not what the detective wanted at the time, and he would adjust matters with the little man.

Splinters hastened to Dipps' den, and found that worthy in.

"Come," cried he. "It's time Dipps."

The owner of the maimed hand sprang from the couch and looked into the face of his friend.

"You must see Miss Lotty—at once."

"Why at once, Splinters?"

"Ask her what she'll give for the secret."

"Do you know it?"

"Find out first what she is willing to pay; after that we play our hand."

"Will I find her at home?"

"Yes, yes. Be quick about it."

Dipps was gone in a flash, and Splinters sat down to wait for him.

It did not take Dipps long to reach the vicinity of the Daniels mansion, and the bell announced his coming.

It was late, but what of that? It was a case of emergency.

Once in the parlor the crafty Dipps, with the recollection of his last visit to Doctor Baker's still in his mind, waited for Lotty to make her appearance.

He watched the door like a hawk.

When it opened, and the striking figure of Lotty Daniels appeared, he uttered a cry of astonishment.

She did not recognize Dipps.

As she stopped in the middle of the room the eyes of Dipps got a cold twinkle, and he bent his body forward.

"I've called on business," said he. "What will you pay responsible parties for a clew to the tragedy in the library?"

The girl started, and her gaze remained fastened upon Dipps for a moment.

"Can you furnish the clew?" she asked.

"My question first, please. I must insist, miss."

"You must see the detective."

"But we prefer to deal with you, miss."

"We?" echoed Lotty.

"Yes, me and my partner."

"Oh you are not alone in this matter?"

"I am not. We can find the clew."

The face of the girl underwent a change.

"You must first give me some proof of your ability to give me the clew."

Dipps drew within himself and looked at her.

"You must not think hard of me for asking for proof. It is a terrible case. I want to find the hand that struck him down, and I am willing to pay for the clew."

"But how much, miss?"

"I can state no definite figures."

"Which is just what I'm here for. I want it made definite."

Lotty looked once more at the man and caught sight of the scarred hand he was hiding.

Dipps tried to draw the hand away, but her gaze followed it.

He flushed and then lost color.

"There! look at it!" he cried, thrusting the member into the light and looking at her. "I'm not proud of it, of course, but I can't help it now."

The face of Lotty changed color, but she could not remove her eyes from the maimed hand.

"It's not a burn," continued Dipps, through shut lips. "It's a bite."

"I did not know what it was."

"It's a snake bite."

The young girl uttered a slight cry.

"You may have heard of the reptiles since—"

Dipps caught himself and stopped.

"Serpents?" exclaimed the millionaire's daughter. "Let me show you one."

"No!" and a shiver shook the little man's frame. "I haven't the antidote with me. I haven't the red fluid in my possession. I turned it over to the major."

"To Major Trumps?"

"I beg pardon, miss. I hardly know what I've been saying. Was I talking about the reward?"

"You just said that you had turned the antidote over to Major Trumps."

"I must be mad. I don't sleep o' nights. I am in a stew all the time—in actual torture, miss."

"But you know this man—you are acquainted with Major Jackson Trumps?"

Dipps did not speak. He felt that the gaze of the young girl was riveted upon him, that he was being looked at with her penetrating eyes, and that his very heart was to her as an open book.

He wished he had not set foot in that house. Why had he bargained with the wily Splinters to extort money from Lotty Daniels?

"I'll call again," he said, picking up his hat. "I'm in no condition to talk business now."

But the next moment Lotty stepped between him and the door, and faced him calmly.

"Not a step!" she said firmly. "Some one sent you here. Who is this partner? Is he a myth?"

"He is flesh and blood, like you and I."

"But he planned this play, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you fell into the plan? You agreed to come to me with this story of the clew, which neither of you possess."

Dipps' nervousness increased.

"You can't cross this step till you name the man and tell me the truth. You mentioned Major Trumps. You turned the antidote over to him?"

"Yes, yes."

"Did he send you after it? Did you steal it for him?"

Dipps did not speak.

"You obey him, don't you? You are the man I have heard spoken of, his factotum, slave, tool. You are his shadow, and you purloin for your master. Now, sir, where did you get the antidote?"

Dipps had no color about his mouth.

"You would not betray him, I see. You want to be true to him, but you shall tell me the truth. From whom did you take the red fluid—the antidote for the labarri's bite?"

"I dare not disclose that."

"Very well."

The hand of Lotty Daniels slipped among the folds of her dress, and when it came into view again it clutched the butt of a revolver.

"One must arm in self-defense, even in one's own house," she said, coolly. "I am forced to do so in mine since the night of the great crime. Now, sir, you shall out with the truth. Whom have you plundered? Tell me."

From the revolver into the eyes of the fair girl was but a glance, and Dipps, never caught in that situation before, did not relish it.

"Come! I give you a second!" said the girl.

"But at the end of that time, if I refused to tell you, you would not press the trigger?"

"It is for you to say."

Dipps looked once more over the gleaming barrel of the weapon and took another breath.

"I took it from the doctor," said he.

"There, that will do. Now the door is yonder. You can go."

But he hesitated.

"Go!" cried Lotty. "No reward will be offered for the hand that slew in this house if you are likely to claim it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LITTLE HERCULES.

The night passing, left Genteel Joe, the detective, hot on the trail.

He was still "Diamond Dick" to Goldstein, and that worthy was busy laying the plan he had but partly mapped out.

He wondered if his escape had been discovered by the Demon Doctor, but he was not disposed to return to the house and make sure of it.

He passed the place the next day, and saw about it the usual signs of life.

Indeed, he caught sight of the doctor at the office window, and thought he saw in the eyes a look of triumph.

Goldstein had told him that General Capulet, who, according to his story, had forged the will by which Major Trumps expected to capture a wife, would not come back to play out his cunning hand, but he was anxious to know why.

It was only by catching sight of Goldstein himself during the afternoon of the succeeding day that he tracked him to a certain part of the city, and saw him eye a house there with the keenness of a ferret.

"It may be the general's home," said the detective. "General Capulet may have taken up other quarters, and in that house he may be laying plans calculated to beat the wary Goldstein."

It was soon after dark that the figure of the detective might have been seen beyond the threshold of this house, really the last abode of Goldstein.

It was still and dark.

In one of the rooms the detective struck an object with his foot, and in another moment he had struck a match and was holding it near the floor.

What did he see against the wall but the figure of a man, and over the face the white beard of the fero-

General Capulet was there. The detective took up one of the hands and immediately dropped it with a cry. It wore the red bracelet he had seen on the coachman's wrist.

General Capulet, with his "bracelet," lay on the floor, as he must have fallen after the labarri's bite, and his distorted face told how terribly the fangs had done their work.

The detective searched the house. It was not the dead man's refuge, as he could readily see.

It was not like the house where Goldstein had found the picture of Major Trumps' wife in the trunk.

There was found on the floor a bit of paper with the name of Goldstein torn in two.

It had been Goldstein's abode.

Then Goldstein knew why General Capulet would not take another hand in the game of mystery.

Genteel Joe glided from the place and disappeared down the street.

Half an hour later he entered a little room and cast his eye over a lot of diners at some tables ranged along a not very clean wall.

The White Swan Restaurant was not a tony place, but it was good enough for a certain class, and Genteel Joe watched a man who sat at one of the last tables sipping his black coffee and munching his dark bread.

This person seldom looked up, but kept his chin near the edge of the table. He seemed to be eating against time; but at last, when there was nothing in the cup but grounds, he pushed back his chair and rose.

Joe sat still and waited for him as he came down the aisle.

In another instant, when the fellow came opposite the detective, his gaze dropped and he seemed to recognize Joe. It was Goldstein.

At once Goldstein dropped upon a chair across the table and smiled.

"Been thinking of you, Dick," he said, with a smirk. "Got it all studied out."

"That's good. Can't be any failure, eh?"

"It's simply impossible. The wedding won't be delayed a week."

"Then if we want to save the girl—"

"I don't want to save her," broke in Goldstein. "What is she to me? You see, there's the heir by the first marriage."

"Oh, he had one, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

"You, Goldstein?"

"Don't I? What if we foist this heir on them? Wouldn't that paralyze the whole gang?"

"But one would have to be sure of his man."

"I am sure. There's no mistake; there can be none. He won't deny it. I'll find him within an hour if you say so."

"Come, then, find him. Show me this man—this son of Duke Daniels—and I'll help you play out the hand, whatever it is."

For a moment the face of Goldstein hovered over the detective's like a hawk, and then he drew back.

"I've been thinking about the whole thing," he went on. "I don't care to run the risk unless we can silence a certain person; the only one liable to spoil our plans."

"We can do that. Who is this person?"

"It's the detective."

"Genteel Joe?"

"Yes. I've been to his den. I've looked into the room, but he wasn't in."

"What would you have done?"

"I went there for business. I don't intend that this ferret shall cheat me out of my play."

"No. But you didn't find him in?"

"I did not."

"Better luck next time."

"But, hang it all, we can't waste much time. Time is precious in this case. We must strike soon. But you want to see this heir—this offspring of the first

"I do."

Goldstein quitted the restaurant, followed by the man supposed to be Diamond Dick. It was a bold game for the Home-run Detective and the branded man's confession that he had gone to his den like a thug was enough to tell him that he was dealing with a cool head.

On the street beyond the door of the White Swan, Genteel Joe was hurried away, and in a short time Goldstein paused in front of a dwelling and looked up at one of the front windows on the second floor.

Shall we play out the hand boldly? He may be inclined to show his teeth, for he is keeping back the secret.

"Play it out," said the ferret.

In another moment the twain dodged into the hallway, but stopped there.

Some one was on the landing overhead and the following instant a man appeared on the stairs.

"That's the man," whispered Goldstein. "They call him Splinters, but he is Carl Daniels."

The figure descended and stopped in the hall within arm's reach of the two men.

"Splinters!" said Goldstein.

There was a sharp little cry, and the little man turned and faced the pair.

"Carl Daniels!" continued Goldstein.

"Come, boy, you see we know all. Come back with us! Up-stairs? Of course!"

The hand of Splinters reached for his weapon, but the fingers of Goldstein closed about his wrist, and he was pushed toward the steps.

The little man went up sullenly enough and into the room he had just left.

Goldstein pushed him toward a chair, but Splinters did not sit down, preferring to stand up with folded arms.

He looked first at Goldstein and then at the disguised detective.

His gaze rested the longest upon Genteel Joe's make-up, but he did not betray his thoughts.

"This is my friend," said Goldstein, with a wave of his thin hand. "You can call him Mr. Dick, if you wish, Splinters, or Carl. We want you to confess. You are the son of Duke Daniels?"

The lips watched by the two men were seen to come together, and the face lost a bit of color.

"You say so," he said.

"It is true. You are Carl Daniels, the child by the first marriage. You haven't had the courage to play the hand that might have netted you a million during your father's lifetime, but now we can play it for you."

"You two men?"

"Yes."

"When I want the fortune I'll play the hand myself."

"No defiance!" cried Goldstein. "We are here to play it for you. We can play it out and enrich you."

"But what if I should refuse to go out and proclaim my identity? I don't have to."

"You will when I say the word!" hissed Goldstein. "It shall be a fair divide."

"I rob no one," said Splinters, haughtily.

"No; you are the king of honor. You wouldn't rob a pirate. You live by plunder."

"I—"

"Silence!" thundered Goldstein. "Not a word. Confess! You are Carl Daniels—Lotty's half brother."

"If I am you shall never profit by it. You shall never reap a golden harvest by the confession."

"Hear him!" cried Goldstein, turning to the detective. "Isn't this the cheekiest thing of the day, Dick? This little bundle of humanity defies us. Wait!"

The figure of Goldstein walked over to where Splinters stood, and faced him madly.

"I give you half a minute," he said, taking from his pocket an old watch, which he laid in the palm of his left hand. "Half a minute decides your fate,

A glance passed between Splinters and the detective.

It seemed to tell the little man that he had one friend in that chamber, and as the gaze of Goldstein fell upon the dial of the old timekeeper he suddenly sprang forward and landed a blow full in the branded man's face.

Goldstein, taken aback by this assault, staggered off with a shriek.

He dropped over against the wall in a heap, for Splinters had thrown his whole strength into the stroke and had given his enemy a blow he would not soon forget.

"That much for him," cried the little man turning to where the detective stood. "Let him keep out of my way. Carl Daniels? I'm more than that, but not now. Some other time."

He reached the door and jerked it open.

"I'll see you later on," he said to the ferret, and as he looked his eyes got another light, and he was gone.

"He knew me," thought Joe, the detective. "Splinters remembers having tracked me to Mother Redbird's, but the secret of my escape from the trap and the pit is safe with him."

There was a sound of footsteps on the stairs, the lower door opened and shut, and Goldstein and Genteel Joe were alone.

"Why, he strikes like a sledge hammer!" said the former as he recovered and came forward. "He has the quickness of a cat and the power of a lion, like his father. Duke Daniels was thus gifted. But wait, Diamond Dick. I'm not done with this young Hercules. I shall let him know that it is death to fool with Goldstein the hater."

Genteel Joe made no reply, but he resolved while he looked at the speaker that the hand of Goldstein should never terminate the career of his friend, Splinters.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WHIRLING MATCH.

There was one thing made clear by the meeting with Goldstein and the subsequent encounter with Splinters, and that was the dagger and the ring found in Splinters' quarters by the detective when he searched the little safe there.

If Splinters was the son of Duke Daniels, then the dagger was an emblem of vengeance, and the ring which it held on its steel the ring which at one time belonged to his mother, the dead millionaire's wife.

Joe Nichols recalled his visit to the safe when he got rid of Goldstein, after Splinters' encounter with him, and once more on the street, he went back to Mother Redbird's.

The trail was shortening, not only this but it was all the time getting plainer, and when he found himself in the cramped room to which the old woman had assigned him, he went over a lot of paper bits pasted on a sheet.

These were the bits which Zara had picked up in the state-room occupied by General Capulet on his passage over on the Paris, and now they possessed a startling meaning.

The story told by Goldstein that the will which gave Lotty Daniels to Major Trumps was a forged document and the work of Capulet was confirmed by the papers, and at last the detective looked up with a gleam of victory in his eyes.

The next day he might have been seen watching a woman heavily veiled who alighted from a cab near a park, and had drawn her veil a little closer.

The woman was Florence, the reputed wife of Major Trumps, and the detective tracked her to the house tenanted by the major.

She was permitted to go away unmolested, while the major closed the door and then came out himself a few minutes later.

It was the major whom the detective, still disguised, wanted to see, and he threw himself upon the man's trail,

Jackson Trumps wanted to see another person, and in a short time the detective saw him enter a house where he knew a surprise awaited him.

Major Trumps, in blissful ignorance of his espionage, opened the door with a key, which he took from an inner pocket and locked it behind him.

He passed into a room alongside the hall and rapped on a table there.

The only reply was an echo, which caused him to look round and smile.

"He ought to be here at this hour," said the major above his breath. "He is not exactly safe on the streets, and won't be till after we've played out the hand. But I'll wait awhile for him."

He sat down and waited five, ten, twenty minutes.

"I want to tell him about the infamous paper I was compelled to sign at the doctor's office. It was simply insulting. He wants the lion's share, and I had to yield it. We must put our heads together, and, if we can, we must beat this man. In his power? Of course I am to a certain extent, but I have the antidote, thanks to Dipps, and I don't fear his reptiles as I used to."

He laughed at the end of his last sentence and then waited another half hour.

"Octave does not come," he said, rising. "I'll leave a note for him, and he will know that I've been here."

He found a sheet of paper in the drawer and wrote thereon a brief message for General Capulet.

This he replaced in the drawer and quitted the house.

Outside the hunter was waiting for his quarry, and the moment Major Trumps started off he was followed by Genteel Joe.

Suddenly the major started and then stopped, his face becoming nearly white and his eyes dilating.

The person who had crossed his path was a little man whom he seemed at once to recognize.

It was the inevitable Dipps.

At the same time Dipps saw the major and came sidling up to him.

"Could I claim a moment of your time?" said Dipps. "I don't want to take up another bit of it—just a moment."

The two adjourned to a resort near by, and in a back room, with a table between them, they sat face to face.

"You're going to marry, aren't you?" said Dipps.

Major Trumps did not reply.

"It's none of my business, perhaps, but, you see, it's a case of importance, and if you want to have a happy time you've got to make things hot for the doctor."

"What's that? For the doctor?"

"Don't you know the doctor?" cried Dipps. "Come, you know him quite well, major. Doctor Baker, the man with the reptiles, is just now too dangerous to be discussed in loud tones."

"You know something, Dipps?"

The little eyes across the table fairly snapped.

"Wait till the detective gets all the threads in his hands. He's picking them up one by one—"

"What detective?"

"This one called Genteel Joe."

"Did you call me in here to tell me this?" the major cried. "Why, man, I don't fear the detective."

"When did you cease fearing him?"

"I don't fear him, I say."

"Then you've compromised with him."

"No."

"You must think that the doctor will sweep him from your path and that you'll ride to fortune and love without trouble."

"Never mind that, Dipps. We're almost there."

"Do you think that because I carried off a little phial from the doctor's laboratory you are safe? Why, I wouldn't build on anything of that kind. The reptiles are bad enough, but the detective is just as dangerous."

"I'll take care of serpents and ferret," laughed the major. "But, Dipps, what

makes you think the detective is on the trail now?"

"In the first place, Mother Redbird has taken in a lodger."

"Who's Mother Redbird?"

"She's an old lady in Dark Alley, for where she lives is hardly a street. She has taken in a lodger, I say, and I would bet my head that he's the ferret."

"He can't be, Dipps. It's simply impossible."

"Glad you think so, major. I thought I would warn you, but if you know, why, that settles it."

"When did you see this lodger?"

"Last night."

"At what hour?"

"It was nearly midnight."

"Where was he?"

"In Mother Redbird's house."

"He can't be the detective, I say. I have seen him elsewhere. I would bet my head—"

"Don't do that. You might lose it, major, and it's a head that can't be spared just yet."

"Never mind. I'll risk it anyhow. Genteel Joe, the man who has given me a little worry, won't do it again. He's safe."

"But wait. The man who is Mother Redbird's lodger looks just like Genteel Joe. Didn't I see him retire last night, and didn't I witness a little business which tells me that he is still on the scent?"

Major Trumps' face seemed to lose color.

"And he was watching Florence today."

"The same man was?"

"Yes, the same man—Mother Redbird's lodger."

For half a second the major did not seem to breathe. He looked across the table, and his face lost a little more redness.

"I can settle this whole business in a few minutes."

"Perhaps you would better do so—the sooner the better, of course."

"I'll do it, Dolliver."

Major Trumps turned back and walked rapidly for twenty minutes.

When he stopped he was at Doctor Baker's door, and rang with some nervousness.

But as there was no reply to his ring, he opened the office with a key which he carried, and went in.

Doctor Baker did not greet him, and after a minute's silence the major slipped away to turn up in the room where he had been permitted to examine the pit beneath the stairs.

He went about his business with a good deal of coolness, but at the same time it was evident that he was beating down some excitement which came up in spite of him.

He found the button which opened the trap, and he soon leaned over the brink of the chasm, and tried to pierce the darkness below.

Major Trumps struck a match and sent it whirling into the pit, the little flame lighting up the place as it descended and showing him the walls and their ooze.

At last the match, burning out in an expiring effort, rested on the floor far beneath him, and he saw what he had seen before—the human-like figure on the flags.

But all at once the eager eye of Major Trumps saw more than this.

He noticed that instead of a human figure, it was but a coat, and then he saw that the battered hat lay on the other side of the dungeon.

"He isn't there," he said as the match flickered out and left the place in darkness once more. The detective is gone!

Major Trumps seemed to be overcome with a sudden weakness as he retreated from the spot.

The door of the pit shut of its own accord, and he went back to the office.

"If he is out, Dipps was right. He saw him at Mother Redbird's. He has found the ferret for us, but—"

Some one was on the stairway leading

to the laboratory, and the major looked toward the door leading to the flight.

But the noise ceased even while he gazed, and he waited a while for it, but was disappointed.

"I won't go up. There's the electric mat which caught Dipps, and there's the stairs that captured the detective. None of your infernal pits for me, Jared Baker."

He moved toward the door and let himself out of the office.

As he closed the door he heard a sound that blanched his cheeks, and looking up he caught sight of a face at the window of the laboratory which looked out upon the street.

The eyes were looking down at him, and they seemed to have in their depths the gleam of a fiend, and the major clenched his teeth and said, as he moved away:

"In his power, am I? Wait and see! With the antidote I am not afraid of his reptiles, and some time I'll show him that Major Trumps can break the bands of iron and stand forth master of the situation—when we have outwitted this sleek trailer of the streets."

CHAPTER XXIX.

WARNED TOO LATE.

Major Trumps went home.

Throwing himself into a chair at the table, he went over his experience with Dipps and in the doctor's house, but did not speak his thoughts.

He was thus engaged when he heard a key turn in the outer lock, and the swish of garments greeted his ears for a moment before the opening of the door admitted a woman.

She came in with her face turned toward him, and stopped at the table without a word.

It was Florence.

"I'm being watched," she said at last.

"By whom?"

"I don't know. I was followed last night by a man who had nimble steps and keen eyes. He positively made me shudder with his orbs. I was to be protected all through the game, and was not to have any trouble at all."

"But you could avoid some of this trouble by remaining indoors," said the major.

"I can't be cooped up. I won't remain in. I have a right to the streets. When will the ceremony take place?"

"Within a week."

"Why, that means a year for me."

"I can't help it. We can't do everything at once."

"I don't expect that, but the longer the game goes on the more apt the police are to balk it."

"The police? You fear them, woman?"

"Don't you?"

"Is the doctor cool?" asked Florence.

"You know what he always is."

"Yes, but does he fear anything?"

"He never did."

"I know that, but the coolest men are sometimes caught up by others just as clever, and if this detective—this man who is said to be very clever at trailing a mystery—if he comes out ahead, why, what will your cleverness avail you?"

"Nothing, but we don't dream of failure."

"What does she say?" eagerly asked Florence. "Did she object? Is she ready to obey the will?"

"She gave in without a murmur."

"Better than we thought, isn't it? Now, when the general gets his share, you'll let me off."

"Of course. I'll be glad to get shut of you," and the man laughed. "Of course, you understand that it won't last long—only long enough for me to get my hand on the golden egg."

"What is she worth?"

"Three millions."

"It will make us rich."

"But there's the doctor."

"Yes, the Demon Doctor, the man without whom we could not have won. I don't forget him. I couldn't if I wanted

to. The night he showed me the reptiles he made my blood run cold, and I thought if he should strike for the whole fortune, what a weapon he would have in those deadly things."

"Not so great a one as you suspect. You know that he has discovered the antidote to the bite of the labarris; but there may be some of it in other hands."

Florence caught eagerly at the meaning of the last sentence.

"Is it in our hands? Can you boast of having the antidote? If we only had it—"

Major Trumps left his chair and opened a door in the wall near by. Taking out a phial wrapped in black paper, he carried it to the table and set it down in the light.

"That is worth its weight in gold, and more. It is the essence of life prepared by the master chemist of his day."

"Doctor Jared?"

"Yes."

Florence's eyes gazed at the liquid a little while and her gaze became fastened on his face.

"He gave it to you, did he?"

"Heavens, no! Doctor Baker would not part with his secret for a world. I had to take it."

"By foul means, Jackson?"

"My agent found it."

"The cunning Dipps! I see now. He is capable of doing anything. What a man he is, despite his scarred hand."

"When we are fixed I shall reward Dipps. He has been faithful. He gave me a valuable pointer to-night, and I must change my tactics a little."

She fell back and watched him closely, all the while seeming to wonder if he was actually playing a safe hand.

"It will take place perhaps next Thursday. She is willing, and the sooner the better. After that date, Florence, you can retire. Indeed, I will have but one wife, you understand; but the last love will not prove an obstacle to our future happiness."

"If it lasts—if you become infatuated with this girl, even after she has become your wife—remember, your happiness is likely to be cut short! I am in the field for the dead millionaire's wealth. You must not let this girl fasten herself on your heart."

"I will not."

"Swear it!"

"What's the use? You know what has passed between us. It is all in the game, and you have retired long enough to let me get my hands on a million."

"But you must swear it. Here's the dagger. Swear it on this ebony hilt."

"You're terribly exacting, woman," cried the major. "My word has been given."

"But she's pretty."

"You've seen her, then?"

"Yes, I watched her like a hawk at the burial. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Lotty Daniels is very beautiful, and she may try to capture you. I want the oath."

She pushed the dagger with the black hilt across the table and cried out:

"Place your hand on the hilt and swear that you will hate the girl you are about to wed—that you will throw her off at my signal, and that you will not let her fasten herself on your heart. Swear, I say."

The major's hand touched the hilt, and Florence's eyes seemed to snap while she repeated an oath, terrible in its language and import.

"There! that settles it. It makes me feel easier. I am dangerous, and I will not let this girl play a hand of love against me."

"Now, when you quit the house be on your guard."

"For whom shall I watch—the detective or the man who followed me to-night?"

"For both."

"And you?—you must take care of this spotter. It is on the eve of victory. It is almost in our grasp, the fortune of the millionaire. With the girl your wife and

the money at our command—with the doctor's antidote in your hands, what need we fear?"

There was no reply as the major looked away a moment, but his eyes soon came back to her.

Florence drew toward the door, but on the threshold she stopped and looked at him.

"You're going to flinch at the supreme moment. I can see it in your face."

"I flinch? Never! I have nerves of iron, and am ready to finish the game."

"The shadow of the shadower frightens you. Where is he? Where does this fox of the city trail kennel?"

"I don't know."

"Does the doctor know about him?"

"I cannot tell."

"Good-night."

Major Trumps was alone.

His eyes had followed his wife to the door, and he heard it shut in her face.

"She is jealous," he said, with a faint smile. "She doesn't like to see Lotty Daniels become my wife, and, by Jove! at times I pity the pretty victim myself. It's a bold game against her, and it may blight her life, but—Don't give way, major. There's a million in it."

He smoked, but not at his ease. He watched the door, as if he expected to see it open and admit a foe.

It did open, but not for an hour.

The figure of Dipps crossed the carpet, and his eyes had a strange light.

"Did you investigate?" asked Dipps.

"I did."

"Well?"

"You may have been right."

"I was right; no doubts about it. I know now. Genteel Joe is on the trail, and he has picked up another clew within the last hour."

"What sort of clew?"

"He knows who Splinters is. He knows whose foot makes a mark like a cross."

"Whose?"

Dipps lowered his voice and bent his body across the table, looking the major squarely in the face.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

"I never made it a business of looking at foot-tracks."

"You would be wiser if you had. If I had looked at a certain foot-track one time I might not have this scarred hand. I might not have felt the bite of the little reptile from Brazil. But, never mind. It's not a question of snakes now. It's a question of life and death. The detective will draw in his net before day."

Major Trumps bounded to his feet and caught up the phial.

"I don't think you'll need that," said Dipps, pointing at the red liquid. "It saves only after the flesh feels the fangs of the labarri. Genteel Joe holds about all the threads in his hands. What are you going to do—warn the doctor?"

"Why not?"

"I wouldn't. Let that villain die in his luxurious den!"

The outer door opened and Major Trumps and Dipps exchanged glances.

"It is he! It is too late!" cried the man with the withered hand. "The master of the secret has come!"

Major Trumps flashed a revolver, and as he turned toward the door he came face to face with Genteel Joe.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CAST OF DEATH.

Major Trumps, with the half-lifted revolver in his hand, gazed at the shadower like one struck dumb in the presence of impending doom.

Dipps seemed to get a malicious grin, and then his strange face whitened.

A sudden thought came like an inspiration to the little man, and he looked hastily at his master.

Genteel Joe advanced, his gaze riveted upon the major, and his name on his tongue.

But before that name could be uttered there came up over Dipps' hip, with a sudden gleam in the light, a six-shooter, which looked the ferret in the face.

"It is death to touch the major," said Dipps, as he showed his teeth. "I can't serve two masters, and, though I owe you a life, Genteel Joe, I can't see you take the major without giving him another chance. The hand that killed the nabob is not in this house. You must look elsewhere for it; but you must let the major here have a breathing spell."

Nichols saw the eyes that scintillated behind the trigger, and for half a second he forgot the man watching all at the other end of the table.

"Go!" spoke Dipps to his master. "Go out and break this man's grip if you can. I give you that chance."

It needed no second command, for the following moment the detective and Dipps stood face to face, the sole tenants of the room.

The major was gone!

"You saved him at last," said Joe.

"And why not? Give the man one more chance. He will make battle, but what of that? It won't last long."

"He will warn the guilty. I do not intend to take Major Trumps for murder."

"But you would have netted him. You came hither for that purpose. You can take me, Joe. Time was when I would have turned Major Trumps over to you; but I can't do it now."

"Why not?"

Dipps came forward and held out his withered and scarred hand.

"He saved my life when the serpent bit me. It is the scar that reminds me of his sacrifice. He sucked the poison from the wound, and I slit the hand with my knife to give him the chance. Give him half an hour."

"He shall have no time at all."

Dipps leaned his head on the table, and the detective watched him some time in silence.

"He has gone to warn the magic doctor," said Joe.

"Perhaps. Wait. You will find them together. You know where the reptiles live?"

"You saved Major Trumps because he is something to you. You are in some manner bound to him by the ties of blood."

Dipps leaped up with a cry and stood erect in the middle of the room.

"I am. We are brothers."

"Brothers?"

"Yes, and stranger brothers never lived. The same mother gave us life, but our paths ran apart early in life. Little did I know when the serpent clung to my hand years ago that the man who put his lips to the wound was my own brother. The discovery came but the other day, through his confession. Now, if you hunt him down, remember that he is the brother of Dolliver Dipps."

Joe Nichols stood for a moment before the little man, and saw his face grow hard and stern again.

"Why not?" cried Dipps. "Why should I shield him, after all? It is a plot against a girl's happiness. He has a wife. Florence, the cool one, has stepped from the plot long enough to let it succeed. She is to let him become the husband of Lotty Daniels, and when they have the fortune in their hands the girl is to be flung aside, and the spoils divided. But you know this, for you have picked up thread after thread, Joe, and I need not tell you more."

Meantime, Major Trumps, on the street, had put more than one almost deserted square behind him.

He took no note of shadows, and did not brush many people in his flight.

But one idea seemed to agitate the man; he wanted to escape from the iron grip of the detective.

Presently he ran up a flight of stone steps and bolted into a house, the bell of which he did not ring.

"What is it? What have you seen—the dead?"

He stopped short at the words and gazed into the calm face of Doctor Baker.

Clad in a smoking jacket, the tall figure of the doctor-chemist was a marvel of

strength in the electric light, and Major Trumps looked into the cold gray eyes with a shudder.

He had never seen the man so cool and self-possessed.

"Sit down," continued Baker. "You come in like a whirlwind. There's whiteness at your lips. Wait; I'll give you a sip of Burgundy."

The major waited and drained the goblet with eagerness. It brought the blood back to lips and temples, and in his eyes beamed a light they had not before had.

"You're getting cool now. You will be able to tell me what has happened, in a few moments. Take your time. We've got the night before us."

"The night, man? Gods! you don't know what has taken place."

"That's for you to tell me."

Major Trumps looked around the room.

He felt at the same time the impress of the stolen phial against his heart, and threw a rapid glance toward the room where the doctor kept his pets.

"He will be here. He will follow me," he averred.

"Who, major? What apparition have you seen?"

"He isn't in the pit. The ferret has escaped!"

"You want another draught. Your nerves have been badly shattered. You must get over this before your wedding day."

"But, look for yourself!"

"I let you look; that was satisfactory. You saw the body in the bottom of the trap. You drew back and went off with cool nerves. He is there yet."

"Go and look! Throw your light into the bottom of the pit. Look for yourself."

Doctor Jared arose and crossed the room, followed by his visitor.

The door of the pit opened and the light went searching down to the last stones in the walls.

The doctor peered into the chasm, and the major saw him change color.

All at once Trumps seemed animated with a fiendish desire, for his face flushed and his body bent suddenly forward.

"Why not? I can sweep this man into eternity, in an instant," his thoughts took shape. "He has been the bane of my life. I can push him into the pit and make terms with the trailer."

His blood tingled at the thought, but all at once the doctor turned and faced him.

"Why didn't you?" he asked. "You had an excellent opportunity. It was the masterful chance of your life, coward! Now, sir, stand over there against the wall."

The hand of Baker seemed to cover a certain place on the wall, but the major did not move.

"Stand over there!" the order was repeated. "You would have pushed me headlong into the pit, but your courage forsook you. You have given up the battle. You will make terms with the detective, who has escaped."

The two men were now close together. "You once doubted the power of my pets; the time has come to convince you."

Instead of falling back at the threat implied, the major seemed to laugh.

He had the antidote. He was reptile proof, thanks to Dipps and his own thoughtfulness; he could defy the doctor and his diabolical pets!

Baker tore open a door set in the wall near his head, and lifted out a little cage, from which he whipped a yellowish thing with glittering eyes.

"It kills. But you know this, major. A red bracelet it makes for its victims, and after the sting there is oblivion, and immunity from the hand of the street trailer."

He twisted the serpent round his head.

The major fell back and looked with dilated eyes despite his faith in the red phial.

It was but a second of fear and doubt;

for the serpent suddenly left the doctor's hands and landed like a whiplash on the other's wrist.

A cry of horror burst from the major's throat, but Doctor Jared's face seemed to take on a fiendish gleam.

"Work it out between yourselves!" jeered the doctor-chemist. "I won't interfere. Good-bye, major! You would have sold out at the last moment. But, Doctor Jared never falls into the hands of the minions of the law!"

The victim could not shake the serpent loose, for it coiled itself about his wrist, and already the red bracelet was forming!

He heard the door open and shut, and through the mist that swam before his eyes he saw the figure of the Demon Doctor vanish.

A wild effort he then made to get away, and, as he left the wall, a door seemed to open in his face.

Hands seized and pulled him forward; he was lifted from the floor, and the room was a place of dazzling flame!

"Where is he?" asked a voice at his ear.

The major could not speak; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

The next moment a terrible crash seemed to shake the house, and he fell from the hands of Genteel Joe, who rushed into a room whose door had been thrown open by the explosion.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE UNTANGLED SKEIN.

"The demon staircase!" exclaimed some one who accompanied the detective, and Genteel Joe stopped at the foot of a flight of steps.

The light overhead increased, but he could not see from whence it came.

"There's another way to the laboratory," announced the person at his side. "Come! I found it once, and can find it now."

The pair rushed from the room, into another apartment. It was small, and did not seem to have more than one door.

It was Goldstein who spoke to Joe. He had joined the detective on the street, still mistaking him for Diamond Dick. He now sounded one of the walls with his fist, and a door at last opened.

"See the dark passageway!" he cried, looking at Genteel Joe. "It is seldom used, for the dust is thick."

Joe threw the light of his bull's-eye on the steps and uttered a cry.

There was the mark of a heel in the dust, and the imprint of a cross of nails was plainly visible!

He did not stop to look long, but bounded up the steps, with Goldstein at his heels.

The door at the top of the flight was shut, but the now-excited Nichols threw himself against it.

A dazzling light greeted him and forced him back.

"The current is on," explained Goldstein. "I used to know something about this business."

He pushed past the detective, and found the secret of the glare. At once he shut off the light and tempered it for his companion's eyes.

"Look! Yonder he is!"

Joe paused and recoiled.

An iron chair tipped with steel stood over against one of the walls.

It was occupied by the doctor, and his face turned toward Genteel Joe, seemed to hold the concentrated light of years of triumph!

"Don't!" and Goldstein pulled the detective back. "It is death to touch him, now! Look at the wires at his wrist. He has simply turned on the current of death and revenge. It kills quicker than his snakes. It has done its work already."

The two men stood aloof and looked at the man in the electrical chair, and even as they looked a shelf toppled behind them and among the things upset upon the floor was a little cage, the door of which flew open and something wriggled toward Goldstein's feet.

The strange man sprang away with a cry of horror, while the snake flitted across the floor and out the door to tumble, fold over fold, down the stairs.

Then the house of mystery was searched by Genteel Joe and Goldstein.

In a secret room, the existence of which neither had surmised, they discovered a strange workshop—as strange, in fact, as the laboratory.

In a table drawer there they found a lot of papers, and one fully revealed the story of the crime on the avenue!

In the heart of a package, which the detective opened, was found a little dagger with an ebony hilt, and the width of the blade corresponded with the wound found on Duke Daniels' body!

What more was needed?

As Joe Nichols turned away, with the documents in his possession, Goldstein faced him, saying:

"You are Detective Joe Nichols. You no longer stand before me as Dick, the crook. I had you in my power once, but if I had known—"

"You can try it now," suggested Joe.

"No! It is all over. The game has been played out. You know it all."

"Yes—more than you think."

"You have found the general in his little room?"

"I have seen the man who died by the bite of the serpent."

"And before you stands the man who threw the reptile at his wrist!"

They went down stairs together, as friends.

"Whenever you want Goldstein, you shall have him and his story," said the man, as his hand fell upon the detective's shoulder in the office. "Go out and draw in the net. It holds but little beyond the dead; but it is your triumph. You are at the end of the trail. You have but to find Florence and tell Lotty that she is out of the power of the doctor and his friends."

Joe saw Goldstein depart, while he turned to the white-faced man in a chair.

Major Trumps had freed himself from the red bracelet, and held out his hand to show the detective what a trace it had left on his skin.

"I owe my miserable existence to Dipps—the maimed," he said with a grim smile. "But for him I would be in yon room as dead as the master demon overhead. You found him, Joe? You found the documents, for I see papers in your hands."

The detective nodded.

"It was his hand. I thought so all the time. I was dumb, for I dared not speak or hardly think against that man. The little dagger—"

"It is here," interrupted the detective.

"It convicts the dead, but the living is saved. After all, I'm glad of it. I would have carried out the plot, but the girl will not now have a blighted life. It was a game of the doctor's planning, and it really meant millions. When he turned the reptiles loose in the millionaires' house he intended that one of them should find the nabob's blood; but the reptiles were too slow for him. He accomplished what they failed to do."

* * * * *

In a short time the whole city knew of the startling outcome of the detective's trail.

New York was shocked, to say the least for no one had dreamed that the suave doctor-chemist, the man of skill and success, was the secret murderer of the millionaire, but, not only did the documents and the dagger convict the dead, but the boot-marks in the dust, the silent witnesses of crime, told the story of the midnight deed.

Florence, when found, clung to her evil-minded husband, and for a time she drew sympathy toward him, but the courts refused to be hoodwinked by the woman's devotion, and Major Trumps, with his branded wrist and his evil heart, got the full extent of the merciless law.

Splinters came in for a share of the millionaire's estate, which Lotty was willing to divide; yet he soon afterward betook himself from the scene of his last

acts, as also did Dipps; but Goldstein told the story of how he had killed General Capulet with the reptile sent for his own destruction by the doctor-chemist, and the law leaned toward him with tempering mercy.

Joe Nichols received more than fame and financial reward for unraveling the mystery of the library, for, some time after, he quietly withdrew from the service and took up his abode in the same mansion where he started out to combat the magic doctor and his co-partners in diabolism.

It was Joe's last trail, but it was his greatest achievement, and in time, when little faces came to fill the old house with sunshine, the remembered terrors of the man-hunt passed away, and he seldom recalled them.

The house of the Demon-Doctor was the point of attraction for thousands; but, at last, some one pulled it down, and upon its site arose another mansion, which was not devoted to the mysteries of man-traps and serpent-charming.

The old house disappeared, but from the minds of hundreds nothing could blot the deeds of Doctor Jared and the terrible doom brought about by his treacherous hands.

THE END.

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